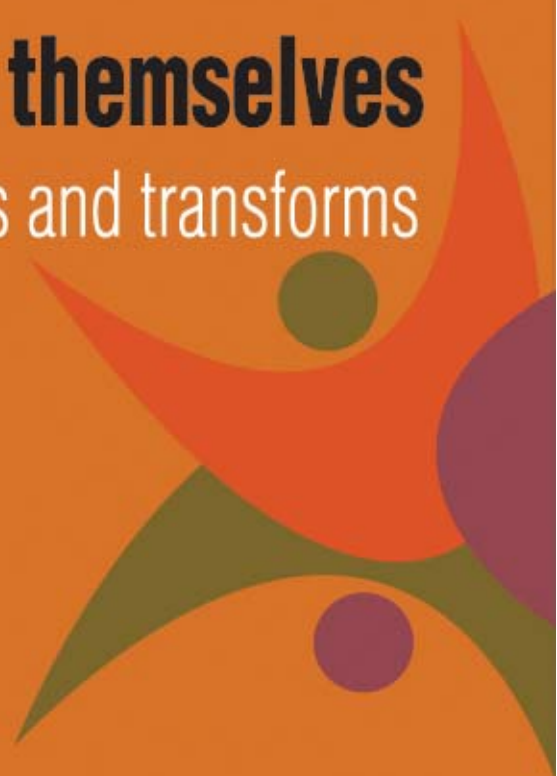# Women empowering themselves
A framework that interrogates and transforms

Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts
gender, poverty and democratisation from the inside out

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Dedicated to
'Lisa' (Professor Elisabeth Croll)
and
'Toni' (Zaitun Mohamed Kasim),
who will always remain with us in spirit.

Lisa truly embodied the feminist academic for whom the personal intersects with the academic through a deep personal commitment to social change. For a short time, she acted as our advisor, touching us with the passion of her ideals and convictions, guiding us with an unflinching attention to the core ideas of our project. We owe her legacy our best work.

Toni infused the project with energy and good will. Committed to social change and equality for women, she tempered her incisive analysis, mentoring of others, critical advocacy, and engaged citizenship with great humour. As our advisor, she taught us that creating innovative ways of asserting women's rights to challenge and confront existing arrangements of power is not only necessary, it can actually be fun.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Contents

The first meeting of the WEMC Consortium Advisory Group at City University of Hong Kong (16-17 December 2006):

[front L-R] the late Elisabeth Croll,
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Salma Safitri Rahayaan, Vivienne Wee,
Homa Hoodfar, Noeleen Heyzer, Amy Sim,
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Chapter One

Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts:
gender, poverty and democratisation from the inside out

1.1. What does WEMC stand for?

WEMC stands for the Research Programme Consortium on 'Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts: gender, poverty and democratisation from the inside out.' The Consortium was formed to address a knowledge gap – that is, how to achieve women's empowerment. This gap is a concern in terms of achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).[1] Institutions that accept that Goal 3 (promote gender equality and empower women) is 'a precondition for reducing poverty and achieving all the MDGs'[2], recognise that there is insufficient knowledge of how to achieve this goal. As stated by the Department for International Development (DFID) in 2005:

> There is a broad consensus on what the priorities are for achieving women's empowerment… Yet we are far from achieving these in practice and there is little understanding of how to achieve them. Current research relating to these issues is relatively ad hoc and anecdotal. What works in one context does not appear to work in others and there is a lack of analysis and synthesis across different empirical contexts drawing together lessons learned. Organisations and decision makers working to empower women therefore need to know more about what strategies work, which ones don't and why this is the case in different situations. *There is a strong need for a new 'narrative' that can reshape practical strategies and approaches at both country and international levels, build on current successes and bridge the gaps between the 'lived realities' of the poor and the actions of decision makers at all levels.* (Our emphasis)

WEMC sets out precisely to develop a new narrative of women's empowerment that would indeed bridge the gaps between women's lived realities and decision-making at all levels. To do so, new questions must be asked to obtain new knowledge. The new narrative must tell a new story that more accurately conveys understanding of how women can be and are being empowered in their lived realities.

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1. Millennium Development Goal 3 (MDG3) – Promote gender equality and empower women. See http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/gender.shtml
2. *The UK's contribution to achieving the Millennium Development Goals.* 2005, London: HM Government, p.28.

Women Empowering Themselves: A framework that interrogates and transforms

This research framework:

1. Makes explicit the key concepts that underpin the work of the WEMC Consortium

2. Indicates what is innovative about these concepts – that is, how these structure a new narrative of women's empowerment

3. Sets out the core research questions addressed by WEMC across all sites

4. Provides a heuristic, open-ended guide for further learning

5. Draws out implications for capacity strengthening, communication, and areas for future development

This first publication of WEMC's research framework as a public document is meant to share the Consortium's learning some two years after its inception.[3] It is expected that the framework will develop further in the course of the programme. Combining research, capacity building and communication, WEMC launched its programme on 1 July 2006, to:

•   Make visible the strategies that are indigenous and meaningful to women in asserting their rights

•   Support women who resist oppressive systems, including Islamist political agendas and other forces that impoverish and marginalise women, and

•   Promote women's empowerment as democratisation from the inside out

The Consortium has eight key partners:

1. Southeast Asia Research Centre (SEARC), City University of Hong Kong – the Lead Partner

2. Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre (SG), Pakistan

3. Department of Community Health Sciences, Aga Khan University (AKU), Pakistan

4. Centre for Environment, Gender and Development (ENGENDER), Hong Kong

5. International Gender Studies Centre (IGS), Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford University, United Kingdom

6. Semarak Cerlang Nusa (SCN), Indonesia

7. Solidaritas Perempuan (SP), Indonesia

8. Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML), Regional Coordination Office – Asia

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3.   Earlier versions of this research framework exist as internal documents circulated only within the Consortium.

These Consortium partners work in five research components, consisting of four nodal countries – China, Indonesia, Iran, and Pakistan – and a cross-border component that includes Indonesian migrant workers and Afghan refugees and returnees.[4] Reasons for selecting these five components are explained below.

1.2. Why Muslim contexts?

Elaborating on impediments obstructing the advance of gender equality, Radhika Coomaraswamy, the former UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women observed:[5]

> There's a lot of law writing, standard setting, programmes being planned, but the biggest problem…is that people are using culture and religion to deny women's rights.

The use of 'culture and religion to deny women rights' is thus a global phenomenon rather than specific to Muslim contexts. Nevertheless, Muslim contexts provide a highly significant example of the power dynamics that actively disempower women because of the growing influence of political Islamists claiming that religion itself legitimises – even demands – the disempowerment of women. Similar uses of culture and religion to legitimise women's disempowerment are visible in non-Muslim contexts. WEMC's research findings on Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts are therefore of direct relevance to non-Muslim contexts affected by disempowering politico-religious constructions.

Within Muslim contexts, those opposing women's rights are either the upholders of patriarchal traditions or are newer political forces utilising existing patriarchal structures to disempower women. The latter thus revitalises and re-legitimises the former in a mutually reinforcing convergence of old and new patriarchal forces. Fuelled by their empire-building ambitions, political Islamists seek to impose their construction of a 'Muslim woman' as the cornerstone of an equally constructed, supposedly immutable 'Muslim world'. The totalistic gender system of political Islamists thus strengthens existing patriarchal structures, undermines more gender-equitable Muslim practices, and

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4. For more information about WEMC, including the key partners, see <http://www.wemc.com.hk>
5. Radhika Coomaraswamy quoted in S. Cameron-Moore, 5 May 2005, 'Violence against women rising in South Asia: UN', Islamabad: Reuters, available at <http://www.dawn.com/2005/05/05/int11.htm>

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reduces women to being symbolic boundary-markers without rights.

These politically motivated impositions deny the diverse historical and contemporary realities of over a billion Muslims worldwide, including Muslim majority countries and Muslim diasporas. The political Islamist myth of a single homogenous 'Muslim World' asserts that there is only one way of being Muslim or being a Muslim woman. The agenda driving such a myth is the aim of controlling society by silencing any opposing views and ideas (including other religious traditions), thereby paralysing people's autonomy in general and women's autonomy in particular. Intolerant political agendas of this type inhibit both equitable development and democratisation.

Overturning such constructions and agendas is thus pivotal to Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts. This task is particularly urgent in view of an increasingly internationalist mode adopted by Islamists to propagate the myth that women's disempowerment is legitimised and indeed demanded by religion. Contrary to this myth, historical evidence testifies to the fact that women in diverse Muslim contexts have long negotiated for their rights through indigenous[6] strategies. To understand the dynamics of Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts, it is important to explore, interrogate and make visible the varied ways in which Islam is used for legitimation and de-legitimation, both for and against women.

The growing ideological convergence of disempowering forces at an international level is a distinctive characteristic of the disempowerment experienced by women in Muslim contexts. In an era of insecurities, there is a self-evident need to address the international community's weak knowledge of Muslim societies, especially of how political Islamists are converging with other patriarchies in the exploitation of culture and religion to legitimise the disempowerment of women and how women in relatively inaccessible, disparate Muslim contexts act to empower themselves.

Denying the diversity of histories, cultures, social and political structures, economic resources, as well as laws and concepts about women in Muslim contexts the imposition of the Islamists' monolithic vision promotes:

1. A misconception that the aspiration and struggle for women's rights are alien to Muslim contexts

2. A cultural impoverishment that deprives women of alternative reference points for exercising agency and autonomy

This political shrinkage of envisioned possibilities inhibits women from exercising agency and asserting their rights. It also obstructs policy interventions intended to empower women, including both national and international policy agendas, such as the Beijing Platform for Action and the Millennium Development Goals, which are rejected as 'alien,' as 'foreign', as 'other people's agendas'.

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6. In our usage, the term 'indigenous' refers to women's endeavours to assert their rights in their own socio-cultural context, with no attribution of indigenous identity to the women themselves.

Women who contest politically motivated impositions of 'Muslim-ness' are often labelled and attacked as not being 'real' or 'good' Muslims. They are accused of betraying 'the community', ostracised, threatened, condemned, abused, and de-humanised, with the coercive punishment justified as 'tradition' or 'religion'. The harm they experience includes not only physical and psychological harm, but also social ostracism entailing the withdrawal of all existing support, the forfeiture of social capital and even a complete loss of social membership.

Despite such daunting obstacles, women consistently act to empower themselves. Most, however, have struggled alone, their strategies largely undocumented, their endeavours muted by violence posited as 'tradition' or 'religion'. It is thus an urgent priority to document and analyse how women themselves use culture and religion, among other resources, to reshape disadvantageous power relations at different levels. An in-depth understanding of their indigenous empowerment strategies will help to counteract the disempowerment inflicted by political Islamists in the name of 'religion.'

The use of culture and religion to disempower women manifests itself in different forms at multiple levels:

- At the macro level, national politico-religious groups, often allied with groups in other countries or with international networks, may seek to re-shape laws and policies to conform with gender-inequitable notions

- At the meso level, local politico-religious groups may also seek to do the same with local laws and policies, often in alliance with national and international groups and networks. In addition, patriarchal kinship-based groups may seek to perpetuate disempowering values and practices, in convergence with the politico-religious groups.

- At the micro level, individuals may assert disempowering values and practices in interpersonal relationships to a greater degree, often encouraged by trends at meso and macro levels.

The power dynamics operating at each level are distinctive. Complementarities as well as contradictions may emerge between the different levels. There is a need to understand the power dynamics within and between levels, and to assess their respective impacts on women's empowerment, so that effective strategies can be formulated to address these. Without dealing with these disempowering forces, it is impossible to achieve women's empowerment. Women can be empowered only by overcoming disempowering forces, old and new.

It is important to clarify that WEMC is concerned with women in social contexts in which 'Muslim-ness' constitutes a key dimension, not just with women identified as 'Muslim' in one way or another. In addition to states in which the majority of the population is Muslim, 'Muslim contexts' include non-Muslim women living in such states as well as Muslim minorities within a larger non-Muslim population, where 'Muslim-ness' comes to be a differentiating

characteristic between minority and majority. WEMC does not view the presence of Islam as the only, or even the most important, driving force of a gender system. On the contrary, as set out in the following chapters, we argue that multiple factors combine to create a gender system that defines the circumstances in which women's empowerment takes place. We do, however, take into consideration that the worldview of people in contexts where 'Muslim-ness' is of significance will be influenced, among other factors, by their understanding of and engagement with religion – a situation with immediate repercussions for the gender system within which women operate.

1.3. Why has WEMC selected particular research foci?

WEMC decided to focus on Muslim contexts in Asia because almost half of the world's Muslims live in China, Indonesia, Iran, and Pakistan under diverse circumstances that differ not only between countries but also within each country. Such diversity is being overlooked with the spread of stereotypical constructions of 'Muslim-ness' and 'Muslim women' promoted by political Islamists. WEMC examines the ways in which such constructions, disseminated across borders, are impacting on local realities – for example, by reinforcing culturally rooted patriarchies and reducing women's spaces and rights that have long existed.

In addition, a cross-border component includes Indonesian migrant workers and Afghan refugees in Iran (and returnees), because migration, in one form or another, presents new opportunities and challenges for women's empowerment. By focusing on the four nodal countries plus a cross-border component, WEMC is able to compare, among other things:

1. Countries with Muslim majorities (Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan) with a Muslim minority in a secular state (China)

2. 'Islamic republics', to a greater or lesser degree, (Iran, Pakistan) with secular states, to a greater or lesser degree, (Indonesia, China)

3. Muslim women as citizens in their countries (China, Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan) with those who migrate to other countries, either as workers or as refugees, including their experiences as returnees (Indonesian migrant workers and Afghan refugees in Iran)

4. Women from Muslim and non-Muslim communities (Pakistan, Iran, Indonesia)

5. A range of democratisation processes at macro, meso, and micro levels (all sites)

6. Interactions between international, national and local forces, both supportive of and obstructive to women's empowerment (all sites)

Comparative analysis of these and other relevant aspects will make available new knowledge about women's empowerment in diverse Muslim contexts in the countries studied, with wider relevance for other Muslim and non-Muslim situations. The application of such new knowledge can pinpoint specific ways for civil society, development agencies, governments and the international community to catalyse and support women's agency for empowerment, within and beyond the countries studied.

Researching with and for women

*Researchers and respondents in Hong Kong (picture 1),
Pakistan (picture 2) and Indonesia (pictures 3 & 4)*

Indonesian domestic workers: organising to protest against Hong Kong labour laws

Hong Kong
Cross Border Component

From personal tragedy to collective action for change

A key focus of WEMC's cross-border research is on Indonesian migrant women workers and their issues of exploitation on the basis of class and gender. These include young Indonesian women who work in Hong Kong as domestic workers and are abused by agents and employers. The following illustrates how personal tragedy becomes the basis of collective action for change.

According to the chairperson and founding member of ATKI (a migrant workers' association), Eni Lestari, it was after she had run away from her employer and had taken refuge in a shelter that she learnt from other migrant workers how and why the Indonesian migrants should form their own organisation. The organising activities of migrant workers of other nationalities in the shelter convinced Lestari and her compatriots that the only way to solve the problems of exploitation in labour migration was through collective action. For many like her, this marked a turning point, where the education they received on international rights discourses, political rhetoric and organisational development was key to their development of multiple perspectives, changing their worldviews and how they relate to the world at large. Organisational mentors provided advice, skills training, education and practical assistance in the critical phase of group and consciousness formation, enabling the workers to understand that their individual problems were collective and class-based, rather than isolated misfortunes.

Excerpted from:

***Amy Sim, 2008. 'Women versus the State: Empowerment and leadership in labour migration from Indonesia'. WEMC research paper submitted to the** Asian Pacific Migration Journal*

Laying stress on girls' education in Sumatra, Indonesia

China

Culture as a hindrance to women's education

The interviews of Ma Yaping showed that the people in the community are using 'culture' and 'tradition' to rationalise restrictions to girls and women in availing of their right to education.

'It's easier to use girls, they can help with household chores, basically, it's a tradition to privilege men over women.' – (Interview with township cadre)

'The men in the village don't cook (laughter), don't wash clothes, don't clean, these are a woman's jobs… Girls, at 12 and 13 they help with the household chores, and are easy to instruct.' – (Interview with female villager)

'The tradition of us [from] ethnic minorities is that the men don't cook, wash clothes or clean the house, those are women's jobs. If men do these things, it'll be a joke for others.' – (Interview with female villager).

More importantly, the information we collected shows that the tradition of 'men inside, women outside' in the local culture creates attitudes toward gender roles that spill over into education, expressed in the idea that it is useless for women to be literate. This is the main reason for the lack of support for the development of national education for women from families and the community, and its effects are felt in the high rates of dropping out from school among girls.

Excerpted from:

Ma Yaping, 2008. 'Researching on Education and Development among Muslim women in Gansu, China'. Unpublished WEMC research paper.

Maria Jaschok of IGS with research colleague, Shui Jingjun and respondents in a women's mosque. Henan, China

Chapter Two

Conceptualising empowerment as the transformation of power relations

2.1. What is 'empowerment' and why does it matter to women?

'Empowerment' is a term widely used today by many different people, including activists, feminists, policy makers, as well as the World Bank, albeit usually with different understandings of the term. Our concern here is with its use in development discourse and the implications this has on how women's empowerment is being conceptualised. Our overarching purpose is to understand how women can, and do, empower themselves; to identify the forces that obstruct them and those that support their empowerment, so as to enhance the former, while reducing the latter.

Given that the root word in 'empowerment' is 'power', it is logical that any examination of 'empowerment' should entail some analysis of the power dynamics that are implicit in all social, economic, cultural, and political relations. It is therefore ironic that even as the terms 'empowerment' and 'women's empowerment' have gained currency in development discourse, and attempts to measure empowerment have multiplied, discussions of 'empowerment' have become increasingly dissociated from the power structures that impact on women in the real world.

De-linking 'empowerment' from its root 'power' is problematic, because it impedes the conceptual clarity required for effective development planning. The development literature suggests that a widening pool of policy-makers, development practitioners and institutions now concur that 'women's empowerment' is an important, possibly critical, ingredient for development in terms of both reducing poverty and accelerating economic growth. Unfortunately, there is a persistent tendency to view women's relative lack of power as stemming from their lack of education, health or other skills and assets. This reluctance to address the power structures which women inhabit is a serious blind spot that hinders efforts to support women's empowerment, notwithstanding declarations of good intentions, as stated, for example, in Millennium Development Goal 3 – 'Promote gender equality and empower women'.

Through deliberations among research partners on how empowerment may be defined, WEMC has developed a working definition of 'empowerment' as an increased capacity to make autonomous decisions that transform unfavourable power relations. In keeping with this general definition, 'women's empowerment' has been defined as an increased ability to question, challenge and eventually transform unfavourable gendered power relations, often legitimised in the name of 'culture'.

From this understanding of empowerment, it follows that increasing schooling and improving health indicators may enhance women's status but that these cannot directly empower women if the power relations in their everyday lives disempower them in ways that prevent them from exercising autonomy and decision making. Development interventions that effectively reduce inequities undoubtedly increase women's access to the building blocks of power. Supportive public discourses and laws do contribute significantly to making an environment that promotes women's agency. But these ameliorative factors do not change existing relations of power. By themselves, they cannot bring about women's empowerment *per se;* they only provide the conditions under which it may become more likely for women to assert their rights. Without fundamentally restructuring relations of power, the mere amelioration of conditions only reshapes the milieu of existing power relations, allowing these to persist in other guises.

The WEMC Research Programme Consortium views power as central to women's empowerment. Our understanding is that it is misguided to assume that women are to be empowered from a zero position – that is, from a position of no power to a position of power, as if power is 'a kind of stuff that can be possessed by individuals in greater or lesser amounts' (Young 1990: 31). On the contrary, we see women as already located within disempowering power structures. In other words, women have no option but to struggle to become empowered from a position of disempowerment within the complex web of power structures they inhabit that have economic, political, social and cultural dimensions.

WEMC conceptualises power as a relational, qualitative phenomenon shaped by contesting forces, not a quantity to have in incremental amounts. As researchers, our concern is not with measuring empowerment to see who is more or less empowered at any given point of time, for such static assessments do not help us to understand how women become empowered. Rather, our concern is with women's capacity to think as free agents, able to make autonomous decisions that transform unfavourable power relations. Two parts of this statement raise questions that have to be addressed:

1. Women's capacity to make autonomous decisions: What enables women to have the capacity to make autonomous decisions? What is the source of their autonomy? What does autonomy signify to women in different contexts?

2. Transforming unfavourable power relations: How and to what extent can unfavourable power relations be re-oriented so as to support women's empowerment?

2.2. Women's capacity to make autonomous decisions

A basic premise of WEMC is that women can be empowered only through their own agency – that is, through decisions and actions undertaken as subjects of their own empowerment. We see the process of empowerment not just as a reversed mirror image of the process of disempowerment. That is to say: while women may be disempowered as the objects of power exercised by dominant others, they cannot be empowered in the same way – that is, as mere objects of 'empowerment'. On the contrary, women themselves need to reject the power arrangements that disempower them and not see these as legitimate, pre-ordained or God-given 'laws' to which they must submit, willy-nilly. Without their subjective rejection of such arrangements, even when existing relations and structures are altered or even eliminated by external forces, unfavourable power relations can be easily reproduced, including by some women who internalise these as a legitimate social order or culture.

How do women arrive at moments of empowering epiphany? Our answer draws inspiration from Freire (1970: 31):

> In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform. This perception is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for liberation; it must become the motivating force for liberating action…. The oppressed can overcome the contradiction in which they are caught only when this perception enlists them in the struggle to free themselves.

Sceptics may perhaps wonder whether non-literate women living in poverty understand and value the process of reflection as a means for empowerment. WEMC researchers' findings from focus group discussions (FGDs) held in 2007 in Bulukumba in Makassar, Indonesia, confirm that non-literate, poor women are indeed conscious of the need for a space for them to share their experiences. FGDs organised by WEMC proved to be an eye-opening experience; the village women are now inspired to insist that village leaders officially invite them to participate in public discussions to ensure that their voices are heard (Rustam et al 2008: 52). Bulukumba is of particular significance given that 'sharia law' is currently being rigidly enforced in the village, down to having 'sharia police' to enforce this. Unhappy at what they consider to be insufficient education, the women feel that it is 'too late' for them to pursue formal education. Nevertheless, they want to have more discussions that would enable them to discuss and be heard on issues such as

the compulsory dress code of *jilbab*[7] imposed on all women in their village.[8]

Similar sentiments were expressed in focus group discussions in Pakistan. One FGD brought together urban women in Vehari (south Punjab) in one of the poorest districts of the country. In concluding the discussion, the discussants – poor and lower middle-class women, some literate, some not, who did not know each other – thanked the team for the unique opportunity to reflect on and to discuss issues relating to women, gender, and empowerment. They specifically requested more sessions to enable them to continue their collective reflections and discussions. In the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) which has suffered the impact of militant politico-religious parties, both in and out of office, a group of urban Christian women were so appreciative of the discursive opportunity WEMC provided that they concluded the FGD with a collective prayer for the success of the research project and for continuing opportunities of such reflective processes.[9]

Such findings reaffirm the conviction among WEMC researchers that it is vital for opportunities to be created and promoted that enhance the reflective capacity of women, such that their reflections can lead to actions for their own empowerment. But the actual process of reflection and action is necessarily a journey that women must undertake for themselves. All that friends and supporters can do is to provide the appropriate equipment (e.g. metaphorical maps, compass, food, water) for their journey. We must not mistake the support for the journey.

How can we know whether women have made the actual journey of reflection and action vis-à-vis the power structures they inhabit? WEMC addresses this question by noting transformations of unfavourable power relations as a result of women's reflections and actions. Women's empowerment – if and when it really occurs – unavoidably de-stabilises and disrupts existing power relations. But, between reflection and action, there needs to be a catalytic shift in thinking that questions and ultimately overturns the legitimacy of existing power configurations and simultaneously brings about a legitimation of new relations, intended or actual. This process of transformative thinking is being tracked with women at all our research sites – specifically, China, Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan, and cross-border contexts involving Indonesian migrant workers and Afghan refugees as well as returnees.

The crux of women's empowerment lies in the transformation of the gendered relations of power that systematically disempower them. There is no magical shortcut that can empower women by bypassing fundamental issues of power. Women cannot be empowered through some sneaky sleight of hand, as it were. However, it is necessary to understand that empowerment is not necessarily a linear progression.

A questioning of existing structures and relations is a necessary but insufficient

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7. In Indonesia, *jilbab* refers to a type of head cover that covers all hair, ears and neck, leaving only the face visible.
8. This finding reinforces evidence documented by historians of early communist ideological work in rural communities and among women in China. See, for example, Hinton (1966).
9. Shirkat Gah, WEMC Field Reports 2006 (South Punjab) and 2007 (Peshawar, NWFP).

pre-requisite. Rejecting the authority of current power structures only makes action more likely, not inevitable. Women may consciously opt not to avail themselves of opportunities to challenge existing configurations of power, as indicated by WEMC field findings and analysis of the literature. Decisions to challenge the status quo are dependent on women's visions of themselves and their potential futures, as well as on their assessment of the potential sources of support they can mobilise for overcoming obstacles, and the risks and costs such actions may entail. There are indications of women making strategic choices to challenge or disrupt one area of power relations, while ostensibly not challenging another area. One of WEMC's key research tasks is to understand what motivates and enables women to act for change and the factors that underlie their strategic choices.

Even when change does occur as a result of women's autonomous actions, a critical question is whether this is merely a hiatus in the power relations and hence a coping mechanism, or whether it is a deeper rupture in existing power arrangements that will lead to structural reconfigurations in favour of women, or alternatively, to a backlash. Answers to this question are pivotal for mustering appropriate support to help ensure that power structures are permanently transformed into more gender-equitable configurations.

The following diagram depicts how the different elements involved in women's empowerment and disempowerment come together in a systemic fashion:
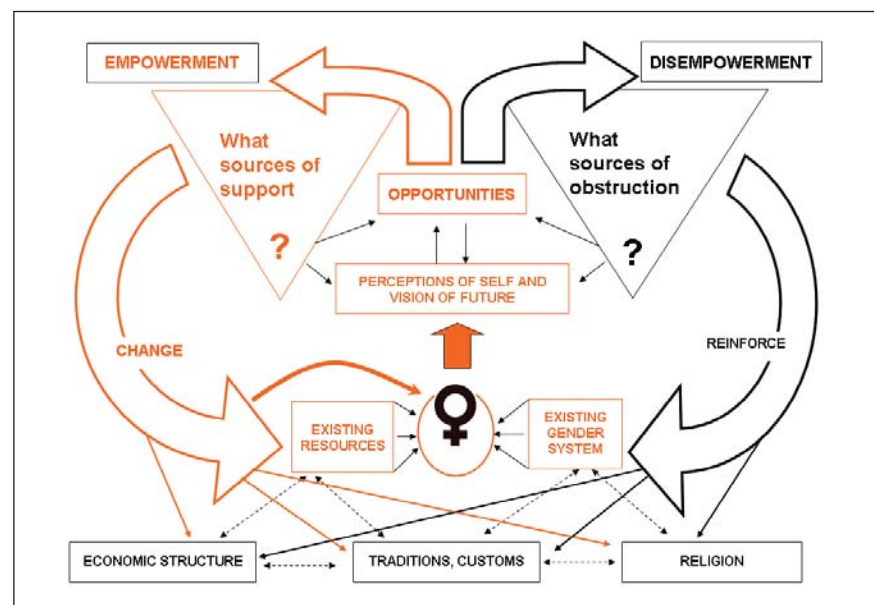
Diagram 1: **A woman's path to empowerment and the support or obstruction she encounters**

As depicted in Diagram 1, even when opportunities present themselves, these are likely to be accessed by women, only if:

(i)   Women know of the existence of such opportunities

(ii)   Opportunities are made available by supportive structures

(iii)   Obstructive forces blocking these opportunities can be surmounted

(iv)   Women themselves regard these opportunities as relevant in the context of their perceptions of self and other, and in their envisioning of the future

WEMC seeks to understand the real-world processes of women's empowerment, in order to suggest how their empowerment initiatives can best be strengthened. For this, it is first necessary to identify the obstacles women confront and how they manage (or struggle) to overcome these, the nature of support women are able to mobilise, the discourses used by women in their engagements, and the outcomes of such empowerment initiatives. Triangulating such information will enable a better comprehension of the opportunities and constraints for empowerment that women encounter in their lived realities.

Moreover, because women are situated in different gender systems, their empowerment necessarily occurs within the distinctive gender system they inhabit. A gender system is a system of constructing and regulating specific standards for males and females, as well as relations between them, in terms of relative hierarchy or relative equality. Intersecting with other forms of power relations, diverse gender systems produce varied spaces for women's initiatives and empowerment, accompanied by distinctive constraints, diverse sources of support, and dissimilar access to a range of resources. Women are not a uniform undifferentiated group even within the same gender system. Particular women and groups of women enjoy the privileges and suffer the discriminations emanating from identities other than gender, such as class, ethnicity and religion, to name only a few.

The structured space for a woman to make autonomous decisions may be greater or lesser or shaped in a particular way, depending on complex intersections between the gender system (relatively hierarchical or relatively gender-equitable) and other systems of power relations, producing varied conditions for the empowerment or disempowerment of different women.

These include, for example:

–   Kinship ideologies and practices (patrilineal/patrifiliative, matrilineal/ matrifiliative, bilateral, etc.)

–   Local power structures (feudal, bureaucratic, kinship-based, class-based and combinations thereof)

–   Class relations (tribals, peasants, urban poor, working class, middle class, upper class, aristocracy, etc.)

–   Collective identities (religion, sect, class, caste, ethnicity, etc.)

- Legal statuses (citizen, resident, migrant worker, refugee, etc.)
- Geographical locations (rural, suburban or urban), including proximity to resources and centres of power
- Political regimes (authoritarian, democratic, secular, theocratic, or combinations thereof)
- Cultural contexts (traditional, modern, secular, religious, etc.)
- Economic systems (pre-industrial, industrialising, or industrialised)
- Access to and movement to other locations (i.e. possibilities for travel and migration within and beyond the country)

Furthermore, within these complex intersections, individual women are differently positioned in biographical terms of age, birth order, kinship status, marital status, residence after marriage, parental status, sexual orientation, citizenship status, able-bodiedness, and so on. Additionally, in a highly differentiated society, the same woman may live in different gender systems simultaneously, each with its own rules. For example, the gender system operating at home may differ from that of the work place and also from that operating in the public spaces she needs to traverse from one gender map to another.

Intersecting systems of social organisation have a direct bearing on poverty, as indicated by research employing participatory assessment tools to understand what poverty means to those experiencing its negative impact. This is confirmed by WEMC findings in Pakistan, for instance, where participants rarely, if ever, define poverty merely in economic terms. Differentiated economic status within a particular community is viewed by research participants (women and men) as directly correlated to social belonging – familial, ethnic, tribal and religious, as well as to access to state institutions and political influence, among other factors. Women highlight family culture as pivotal to their own relative poverty, and to the potential routes they envisage to empowerment.[10] The combined impact of such social factors is inadequately addressed in policy planning.

Empowerment necessarily occurs within a specific gender system, so that the route to empowerment for one woman may not be appropriate, meaningful or possible for another. The effectiveness of measures intended to bolster women's empowerment strategies hinges on whether these take into consideration a significant number, even if not all, intersecting elements. This reasoning underlies our emphasis on learning about and understanding women's indigenous strategies of empowerment – that is, women's endeavours to assert their rights in their own socio-cultural context, according to their specific circumstances. Such basic knowledge is a necessary foundation for planning any action or formulating any policy to support the empowerment processes of specific groups of women.

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10. See, for example, Government of Pakistan (circa 2003), Government of Sindh, Government of Punjab (2003). Research by Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre.

2.3. Transforming unfavourable power relations and the critical meso level

The dialectical interactions between women as individuals and the power structures they inhabit are crucial. While opportunities and constraints for women's empowerment inhere in these structures, women's capacity for human agency has the potential to change these structures. We agree with the argument of Giddens (1984) that structure and agency must be analysed in relation to each other.

WEMC posits that women's empowerment eludes conventional interventions because these ignore power structures operating at the meso level, located between women and state institutions. We contend that meso-level forces construct the most immediate gender systems for women, with attendant rules of propriety and belonging, rewards and punishments embedded in particular power structures. WEMC argues that national policies and programmes that are supportive of women's empowerment cannot be effective if their implementation is blocked by meso-level power structures standing between women and state institutions. Such supportive policies and programmes would include those related to the 'Beijing Platform for Action', the UN Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Understanding the nature of these power structures and the ways in which power dynamics are played out in the lived realities of women is vital. Without acknowledging and addressing these power structures and dynamics, it is insufficient, even futile, to direct efforts at formulating ever more perfect policies at the macro level. There is a need to overturn the mistaken but persistent belief that macro-policies alone pull people along as 'patients' of development.[11] This disregard for people's agency undercuts the foundation of empowerment, causing systemic failures.

Much of development discourse tends to treat spheres of public life – such as education, economy, health care, and the legal system – as the main focus of women's empowerment. The tendency of development discourses and policy documents to use terms such as women's 'economic empowerment', 'legal empowerment', 'political empowerment', and so on, can be misleading, since this formulation suggests that external interventions can bring about women's empowerment by, for instance, enhancing economic opportunities, spreading legal

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11. As stated by Amartya Sen (2004: 1), 'To use a medieval distinction, we are not only patients, whose needs demand attention, but also agents, whose freedom to decide what to value and how to pursue it can extend far beyond the fulfilment of our needs.' Also see Sen (1999).

literacy, increasing women's access to political participation, and so on. Women may indeed utilise political, legal, economic, educational or other resources for their empowerment, but these resources in and of themselves neither constitute nor substitute the process of contestations that, we believe, is essential for the occurrence of empowerment – namely, the transformation of power relations. The economic, health, education sectors – along with religion and culture – merely constitute the arenas where power contestations take place and are not the contestations as such. This stands to reason since these domains do not act by themselves, but are acted upon by human actors in their interactions with each other, be it in alliance or in opposition. A more accurate formulation would be women's empowerment by means of legal resources or in the legal sector, by means of political resources or in the political sector, and so on.

Furthermore, WEMC researchers argue, as other feminist scholars have, that gains made in one domain do not transfer automatically to other domains, for the simple reason that different power dynamics may be at work in different domains. The key is thus to focus on actual power contestations, rather than any given context where such contestations may contingently take place.

2.3.1. The critical meso level

Disempowering power dynamics that are occurring on the ground are generally ignored by policies, programmes and development interventions. The resultant consequence of the over-focus on the macro level is the tendency to overlook debilitating forces that operate at the meso level. The crucial difference between the macro level and the meso level lies in the respective purview of power. The purview afforded at the macro level is governmental power within the full extent of the state's territory. In contrast, the purview afforded at the meso level is localised power within partial territories of the state, such as provinces, districts, villages, households. Because provinces, districts, and other administrative units are, after all, part of the state structure, it is (wrongly, in the view of WEMC) assumed that the macro simply encapsulates the meso. The presumption is that what is ordained at the macro level will automatically flow downwards to lower levels of governance, and that once governance at the macro level is sound, there is no need to pay attention to power dynamics occurring at the meso level.

A more structural reason underlying the tendency to overlook the meso level is

that this is the level at which state and society interface. This interface has generally been neglected by social scientists, who tend to focus either on the state (e.g. political scientists) or on society (e.g. sociologists). This trend in development discourse may perhaps be explained in terms of an implicit bias towards 'modernisation' theory, which devalues existing traditions as remnants of an irrelevant past. This biased approach overlooks a significant body of anthropological, sociological and other social science literature that has long pointed to the interpenetrations of society, culture and the politics of the state.[12]

Habermas (1991) is one of the few who pays attention to this interface between state and society, which he calls 'the public sphere'. However, he has valorised the 'public sphere' as a benign force ideally 'made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state' (Habermas 1991: 176). This conceptualisation of the state-society interface has diffused into development discourse such that 'civil society' comes to be seen as a desideratum to be promoted, while 'society' as such is quietly ignored. (Also see Scott 1999.)

But we ignore 'society' at our own peril, because it is not always benign or even neutral. The 'public sphere' does not always operate for the good of all members of society in its negotiations with the state. At the same time, the state is often not as powerful as one might assume it to be within the extent of its territory and there are frequent de facto convergences between non-formal and formal structures of governance, regardless of and disregarded by de jure formulations.

WEMC's field experience across diverse settings indicates that power structures and power dynamics located at the meso level can and do operate autonomously of the state at the macro level and, in some cases, may even threaten the very existence of the state – for example, through religio-nationalist and ethno-nationalist agendas to build autonomous/independent polities. Such agendas are invariably gendered, as, for example, in Islamist constructions of a 'Muslim woman' as integral to the making of an Islamic state.

Context-specific research with women is needed to investigate whether and to what extent macro-level policies intended to support women actually touch women's lives on the ground. Such research is not being done sufficiently. WEMC addresses this knowledge gap at its research sites. WEMC research thus aims to break new ground by tracking:

  a) How policies unavoidably filter through meso-level dynamics before reaching women

  b) How women's actions interact with meso-level structures, and with what policy implications

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12. See, for example, Yang (1989), Kasulis (1991), Shaheed (2002), Wee (2002), Wee and Jayasuriya (2002), Mosse (2005), van Ufford and Giri (2003), and others.

Macro/international: agreements for women's empowerment - e.g. Beijing Platform, CEDAW, MDGs

Macro/national: policies and laws formulated for women's empowerment in compliance with the above

Meso to micro level
local policies & regulations
customary laws and practices
cultural beliefs
discourses & practices justified as 'traditions'
organisational structures
(gender system, religion, kinship system,
local economy, local government)

Women's daily lives at micro level
(where personal empowerment
or disempowerment takes place)

Diagram 2: **What happens at macro, meso and micro levels**

To comprehend the complex power structures which women inhabit, it is necessary to adopt simultaneously bottom-up and top-down approaches. The former focuses on women's reflections and actions on empowerment issues, while the latter focuses on policies of greatest relevance to women's empowerment, either as support or as obstruction. By combining both approaches, the significance of the problematic meso level becomes sharply visible, through its inevitable filtering of supportive macro-level policies before they can even touch women, and through its existence as a barrier which women must transcend if they are to access supportive policies and laws at the macro level.

It is at the meso level that para-state and non-state actors become most active, because this level is relatively distant from centres of power at the macro level, while at the same time it provides socio-cultural opportunities to intervene with individuals and households at the micro level. It is thus at the meso level that we find contestations and alliances between local state actors, para-state actors and non-state actors. These contestations and alliances form the context within which women's empowerment or disempowerment occurs.

Once meso-level power structures have been captured by para-state actors, then

even soundly formulated policies can be blocked, if these do not accord with the independent political agendas of these actors. Close attention needs to be given to meso-level forces that are operating on the ground, especially the way that local state actors, para-state actors and non-state actors are shaping gender systems and the context-specific spaces available for women's empowerment.

In general, we have found that the more the state fails to be accountable to its citizens and to deliver on its obligations to them, the greater the space is that opens up for para-state and non-state actors to stake political claims and to capture constituencies. These para-state and non-state actors can operate at national and local levels (such as ethno-nationalists or religio-nationalists) or at an international level (such as pan-Islamists). All of these can impose claims on co-believers and co-ethnics as 'nations-of-intent', who supposedly deserve their own states, independent of the existing nation-state, or, alternatively, deserve to assume control over the existing state. For the universalist agenda of the pan-Islamists, the capture of an existing state is only a first step towards building a larger (even global) empire. In this context, culture, religion, ethnic identity, history, all become useful ideological tools for capturing constituencies.

Ironically, policies of decentralisation, supposedly in aid of good governance, have sometimes resulted in the capture of meso-level power structures by para-state actors. For example, in Indonesia, an unintended consequence of decentralisation is that the local governance of provinces, districts and villages is being increasingly captured by political Islamists. When the WEMC research proposal was being drafted in 2005, we had identified nine sites within five provinces as places where 'sharia law' has been instituted. Bush (2007), however, 'estimates that there are about 78 local regulations, in 52 regencies and cities, not including decrees/official letters from Regents, Mayors and Governors, or drafts on which local parliament (DPRD) has not yet made a decision.' These local regulations are imposing various supposedly Islamic behaviour norms on people, especially women. Equally alarming in Pakistan is that since the start of the WEMC programme in 2006, armed political Islamists have taken complete control over swathes of land in the northern areas of Pakistan, entirely displacing the state apparatus and the writ of the state.

In South Asia, studies have noted a large-scale appropriation of the modern state's mechanisms by the traditional power elite, even in the absence of decentralisation programmes (Tambiah 2002). In Pakistan, the effective blockage of national policies by meso-level forces has been evident for some time in coercive moves that have prevented women from voting or standing for political office. Since 2000, the 'devolution process' has complicated matters by opening new forums to be captured by local elites, including state-sponsored alternative dispute resolution forums (Shirkat Gah 2006).

In Muslim communities in China, WEMC researchers have found that decentralisation and the privatisation of education have given rise to local initiatives

for more schools tied either to mosques, to particular Islamic traditions or to foreign-funded institutions, raising important issues to be investigated concerning their impact in moulding 'women's morality' and thus women's social mobility.

2.3.2. Women's indigenous strategies of empowerment at the meso level

Women's indigenous strategies of empowerment are particularly significant for the meso level. Spurious claims are being made by local state actors, para-state actors and non-state actors that women's empowerment is culturally alien and politically illegitimate. If successful, the outcome of such claims is forcible cultural impoverishment that deprives women of alternative reference points for exercising agency, by de-legitimising their initiatives to empower themselves. The resulting disempowerment can be exacerbated to the point that it comes to be systematically institutionalised as 'tradition' and 'culture', to be transmitted across generations and, worse still, to be internalised by women and girls themselves as 'norms.'

Some sceptics may doubt whether women's initiatives at micro and meso levels have any cumulative effect on policy-making and decision-making at the macro level, which tends to be seen as the 'real' level that matters in the politics of the state. We see such a view expressed, for example, by Mason and Smith (2003:4):

> Individual behaviour is strongly influenced by norms, and because of this, large-scale transformations of behavioural patterns, such [as] those that "development" entails, ultimately involve transformations of ideologically-controlled systems, not just an accretion of changes brought about by individual rationality.

Amartya Sen (for example, 1999, 2000) has criticised such perspectives that privilege only the agency exercised by policy makers and decision makers in making macro level policies and decisions, denying agency to all others. As noted by Sen (1999: 137), there is a need to see 'people – even beneficiaries – as agents, rather than as motionless patients.'[13] Sen (1999: 288) explains:

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13. Sen (2004: 1) explained his usage of the term 'patient' as follows: 'To use a medieval distinction, we are not only patients, whose needs demand attention, but also agents, whose freedom to decide what to value and how to pursue it can extend far beyond the fulfilment of our needs'.

An approach to justice and freedom that concentrates on substantive freedoms inescapably focuses on the agency and judgement of individuals; they cannot be seen merely as patients to whom benefits will be dispensed by the process of development. Responsible adults must be in charge of their own well-being; it is for them to decide how to use their capabilities. But the capabilities that a person does actually have (and not merely theoretically enjoys) depend on the nature of social arrangements, which can be crucial for individual freedoms. And there the state and the society cannot escape responsibility.

The view adopted by WEMC on this crucial issue of structure and agency is that a more holistic and multi-layered approach is required so as to comprehend the complex reality of structurations and interacting agencies. On the one hand, we agree with Sen that there is a need to debunk the mistaken but persistent belief that macro-level policies alone can pull people along as 'patients' of development. The disregard for people's agency undercuts the foundation of many development policies and programmes, causing systemic failures. Indeed, as pointed out by Sen (1999: 189-203), recognition of women's agency is critical to the success of development interventions on a whole range of issues, including food distribution, child survival, and so on. Therefore, women's exercise of agency in seeking empowerment has far-ranging, cross-cutting effects on many other development issues. The decisions and actions of individual women, especially when acting in concert, can and do make a larger difference beyond their immediate contexts.

On the other hand, WEMC takes a rather more critical approach to the formation of 'structures', seeing any such formation as a process of 'structuration', rather than a given structure of 'state' or 'society'. We see this approach as particularly useful for understanding countries in various permutations of 'nation building', 'state building', or even 'society building', including both developed and developing countries. By viewing states as dynamic processes of structurations, rather than as static structures, we are better able to understand why merely having agreements and policies on women's empowerment at international and national levels is inadequate.

Shaping such structurations are, of course, the interacting agencies of multiple actors located at different levels, with diverse interests, agendas and resources, in various configurations of alliance and opposition. The relative power of these actors at different levels can lead to distinct structurations of state power at macro and meso levels, in relation to para-state power and non-state power. The resulting picture is far more complex than that of a static state structure where macro-level policies simply flow downwards to lower levels of governance.

In this context, the crucial question to ask about women's agency is the extent to which women are able to shape and re-shape the power relations endemic to such structurations in ways that benefit women, not just individually, but collectively. Before women can exercise their agency as individual citizens interacting separately and directly with a state structure that is governed from the macro level down, they often must first negotiate the power relations that confront them in their

everyday lives at meso and micro levels, including power relations in their family, community and other social groupings.

In recent development discourse, emphasis is being placed on the need for women to be rights claimants, demanding accountability from the state in implementing international agreements and national policies that support women's empowerment and rights. While it is undoubtedly important for women to be rights claimants, they cannot do so effectively as citizens, if their relationship to the state is blocked by meso-level forces. Nor would a mere call for adopting a bottom-up approach suffice, if the path from the bottom upwards is impeded by powerful interests, with agendas other than women's empowerment, that control the structures located between women and broader state structures. The process whereby women can exercise their full citizenship rights in calling the state to accountability is necessarily intertwined with women becoming agents of their own empowerment, negotiating and transforming the power relations that affect their lives.

For the reasons stated above, women's initiatives at micro and meso levels should not be regarded as trivial, insignificant, and without cumulative effect on policy-making and decision-making at the macro level. On the contrary, the exercise of their citizen rights is contingent on their ability to negotiate rights accepted at micro and meso levels – for example, in their family, their clan, their community, their neighbourhood, and the like. Women's successful negotiation of rights, if continuous and progressive, can have cumulative effects in transforming unfavourable power relations. It is therefore of vital importance to know when such transformative effects occur and when they do not, as well as what enables and what impedes successful transformation.

In much of development discourse, there is an assumption that change occurs only with the upscaling of women's initiatives. WEMC's research indicates that upscaling, downscaling, as well as maintaining the same level may present equally valid and strategic options for women's empowerment, depending on the conditions within which women are exercising their initiatives. There is a need to move away from any glib assumption that upscaling is a unilinear process or that upscaling is necessarily always 'good.' WEMC's mapping of women's indigenous strategies thus far indicates that the strategic appropriateness of scale is contingent upon the spaces available for women to assert their rights. The following matrix illustrates options of scale for women's strategies of empowerment.
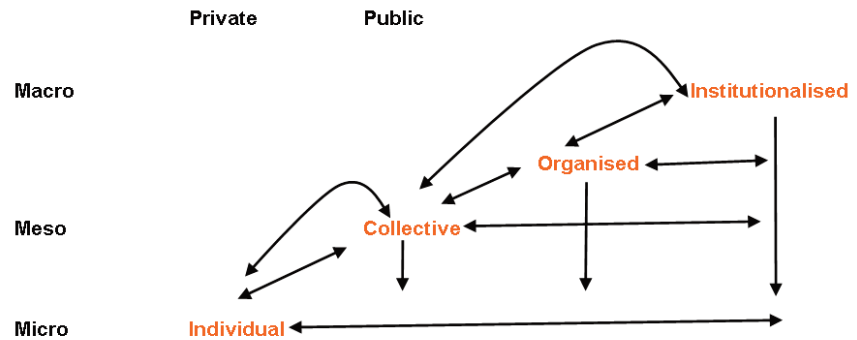
Diagram 3: **Upscaling, downscaling and continuation of women's strategies and initiatives**

The matrix in Diagram 3 shows how women's strategies can be upscaled, downscaled, or remain at the same level. When space expands for the assertion of women's rights, individual actions can translate into collective efforts, become organised, then institutionalised. The difference between what is collective and what is organised is the degree of permanence. Women may come together, for example, for a demonstration, but this does not necessarily last much longer than the event or result in a permanent organisation. On the other hand, to be institutionalised is to be even more permanent than just being organised, with the possibility that changes brought about will become norms. Institutionalisation, such as mainstreaming women's concerns and rights into existing institutions, is generally seen as an ideal mode of bringing about social change. But is this necessarily the case?

When the space is reduced for women to contest power structures and assert their rights – for example, as a result of state suppression – institutionalised change may be reversed, and initiatives that were organised or collective may need to be downscaled into individual activities. Similarly, when space is static, neither expanding nor contracting, the continuation of ongoing activities, at whatever existing level, may be the most viable option. Does this downscaling or continuation necessarily signify retreat or stagnation, respectively?

WEMC has found that it is important not to confuse the scale of women's actions with the direction and intent of their strategies. We argue that it is far more important to pay attention to the latter than to the former. Why? Because, as the motivating impulse, the direction and intent of women's strategies can take multiple forms – private or public, individual or collective, more organised or less organised. These can be upscaled or downscaled, and so on. WEMC's intention is to map more than the mere forms of women's actions: it seeks to map women's desire for empowerment and the potential of this desire to transform the power relations that seek to control, reduce or quash women.

Does such a desire for empowerment exist among women at the grassroots? Does this desire have the potential to transform unfavourable power relations? Have such transformations occurred? Why? How? If such transformations have not occurred, why not? These are the questions that WEMC seeks to answer.

WEMC's research experience confirms the validity of our approach, with findings already replete with examples of women's self-generated initiatives for empowerment, albeit with varying degrees of success. Women's home-grown strategies for individual and collective empowerment at micro and meso levels are seeds rooted in specific realities that may grow into the process we call 'democratisation from the inside out', by which we refer to the increasing engagement of women as full citizens with the capacity to claim their rights and entitlements. Since meso-level forces are structural impediments to women claiming citizenship rights, their capacity to transform these forces is necessarily part and parcel of their attainment of the status of full citizens, able to call for state accountability. Democratisation from the inside out is thus inevitably a bottom-up process, linking women's strategies of empowerment at micro and meso levels to the assertion of their citizenship rights at a macro level.

At this historical juncture when political groups are disempowering women in the name of 'tradition' or 'religion', women's empowerment through indigenous strategies is a culturally appropriate countervailing force, presenting more gender-equitable alternatives to patriarchal impositions of 'tradition' and 'religion' as monolithic truths. The emergence of women's voices from within, calling for gender justice in local terms, can also lead to another sense of democratisation from the inside out – that is, the internally directed development of a democratic society that is accountable to all its citizens, male and female. Democratisation from the inside out, in this sense, has a geo-political significance in a world where the rhetoric of 'democracy' has even been used as a tool to legitimise military conquest. Women's empowerment as democratisation from the inside out thus has the potential to achieve two major outcomes:

a)   Women's increasing political participation as rights claimants as an

eventual outcome of their negotiation of rights at micro and meso levels

b)   The internally directed development of a democratic society responsive to all its citizens, as distinct from the ersatz 'democracy' that is imposed from without

Re-defining gender roles: SCN in Cianjur, W. Java, Indonesia

Indonesia

Contesting disempowering interpretations of religion

While religion is often cited by men and those who benefit from the gender system to define women's roles, some women have been contesting such definitions through religious education and challenging male and female role definitions as social constructions and not as religious injunctions. The following illustration depicts this process among women in Cianjur, West Java.

In the mosque near her house, TSH leads several prayer groups for female members. According to her, she needs to educate people who argue that women's prayers should be conducted in the home, instead of at the mosque, even for festive occasions. She explains that her effort is to deny gender discrimination as part of religion.

OH is an Islamic missionary, who is active in the Majelis Taklim (Islamic study groups). Her perspective is that education is an important part of a woman's personal development, and since the opportunity of pursuing a higher degree seems limited for village women in Cianjur, they have to get the best possible informal education through the. This means that women

have to undertake religious studies and gain general knowledge to improve their standing in the community. She often found women struggling with gender discrimination even in religious teachings and among some male religious teachers. Mrs. OH argues that Islamic values are the same for men and women and that everyone has the same rights and responsibilities towards each other. She actively participates in providing counter arguments to those religious leaders who see women's leadership in political activities as violating Islamic principles.

FT is a twenty five-year-old teacher at a religious school. As the the daughter of a religious leader in the village, she has benefited from her father's teaching experience. Currently, she is one of the researchers in WEMC's local research team from Rahima. FT had a bad experience in confronting gender discrimination by several religious leaders in highly conservative religious schools , who use a religious text, called Uqudul-Lujjayn, which lays down the duties and obligations of the married woman. FT refuses to use this text, which she considers as biased against

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the rights of women. She thinks that the religious leaders who use this text are putting obstacles in the way of women in Cianjur to gain a better understanding of their rights. As compensation, she tries to deepen her understanding through several clauses of the hadith (oral traditions concerning the Prophet's words and deeds) that counter gender discrimination. The reference material she finds useful is from a forum on the Capacity Building of Female Religious Teachers, organised by Rahima.

Excerpted from:

Nurohmah, Lely, Fatimah Hasan, AD Kusumaningtyas and Dini Anitasari Sabaniah. 2008. 'Cianjur: The empowerment strategies and the role of Majelis Tak'lim in the process of women's empowerment against the strengthening of Islam politicisation in Cianjur. A case study on Mulyasari Village, Mande District, Cianjur Regency'. WEMC Research Report.

Occupying public space: a sit-in for change in Iran
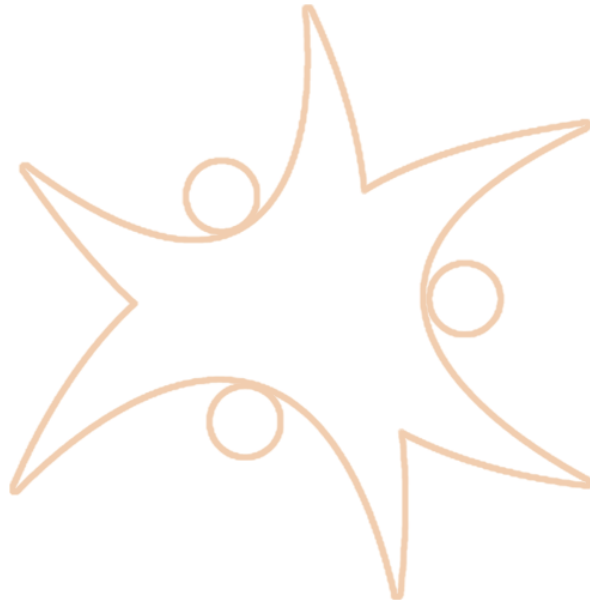
Chapter Three

Strategising from grounded research on women's empowerment

3.1. Towards a comparative lexicon for diverse understandings of 'empowerment'

WEMC's overarching research concern is to understand how women can and do empower themselves in the face of disempowering forces, often legitimised through culture and religion. This overarching research concern is the 'red thread'[14] that integrates all research activities.

The complex, multi-level realities that the research is grappling with cannot be addressed by a simplistic positivist approach, which merely seeks to harvest 'facts' from the field. Instead, research is grounded in the lived realities of our research participants – that is, the women we are doing research with. To ensure such grounding, the research process started with explorations of women's own notions of 'empowerment' and 'disempowerment.' Initial interactions – confirmed in subsequent work – rapidly made apparent the need to build a comparative lexicon of power and empowerment across the different research components, as the terms for 'power' and 'empowerment' vary widely in different cultural and linguistic contexts. This has wider implications for research and interventions in support of women's empowerment. Developing a lexicon will contribute to a more culturally sensitive and nuanced understanding of power and empowerment in development discourse, which, we believe, will be an important means of engaging others working on women's empowerment in different geographical, linguistic and cultural contexts.

The only country where the English term 'empowerment' has a direct equivalent is in Farsi in Iran where *tawana-mandi* is the process of increasing power. In Pakistan, although *tawana* exists as a cognate of the Farsi word, it has come to be used for the energy sector and does not lend itself to empowerment. While researchers did identify terms approximating empowerment in three of the four provincial languages, these are rarely in current usage. The closest approximation to the English term 'empowerment' in the national language, Urdu, is *khud-mukhtar* (being autonomous) and *ba-ikhtiar* (having authority/power). But these terms, especially the latter, is not in common usage. Some respondents initially misheard *ba-ikhtiar* as its opposite, *be-ikhtiar* (without authority/power), implying that the latter is a more commonly used term. Despite these linguistic ambiguities, it is nevertheless possible for Pakistani researchers to inquire directly about women's understanding of the term 'empowerment' using the

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14. The term 'red thread' refers to the thread that runs through a whole piece of fabric.

proximate terms *ba-ikhtiar* and *khud-mukhtar*.

At other research sites, similar questions cannot be asked so directly because terms for this concept are problematic. In Indonesian, the English word 'empowerment' has been officially translated into *pemberdayaan* (a state of being energised) or *penguatan* (a state of being strengthened), where the term 'power' does not even appear, even though the Indonesian term for 'power' exists – *kuasa*. Researchers in the Indonesia team are of the opinion that when the English term was first translated, the element of 'power' was deliberately left out so that the new term would not appear threatening to the powers that be. As a result, the very concept of 'empowerment' has been disempowered from the outset. Furthermore, because *pemberdayaan* is a newly coined word, it is not widely understood by people, other than those working in certain government ministries, the media or NGOs. The women who have heard of this term, instantly associate it with the development projects of the government or international donor agencies. It is certainly not understood as a process challenging existing power arrangements that disempower women.

Such complexities also arise in China. In Chinese, the terms for 'power' and 'rights' are very similar. The English word 'empowerment' has been variously translated into Chinese with its most popular translation, *fuquan,* connoting the granting of rights to women. However, given the highly evolved and progressive legislation in place in China, such a term is greeted as either irrelevant or, not infrequently, as insulting the progress made by Chinese women since 1949.[15]

There is thus a sub-text of postcolonial resentment among some Chinese women activists, who have, over the years, rejected what they perceive to be 'Western women's fierce political movements.' In some cases, this has led to women distancing themselves from the explicit advocacy for women's rights, preferring instead a 'softer feminism' as represented by the term *nüxing zhuyi* (female-ism or feminine-ism) which, Ko and Zheng (2007) suggest, derives its popularity from 'its semantic flexibility' that allows women to negotiate on their own terms without appearing 'threatening.' This has implications for the use of concepts such as 'empowerment', which may be construed as alien.[16]

This sub-text of post-colonial resentment, which may also be found among women in other countries, is particularly significant for this research. As noted above, political Islamists and other patriarchs in other cultural contexts likewise claim that women's rights are alien to 'traditional' society and therefore illegitimate. There is, however, a key difference between the two positions – that is, between those who wish to locate women's rights within their own cultural contexts, including their interpretations of Islam, *versus* those who reject women's rights

15. Ko and Zheng write (2007: 4), 'Women's rights or power *(nüquan)*, experienced a drastic downfall from being a valorised category translated from the modern 'West' via Japan in the late-Qing period [turn of 19th century] to its obscure and debased status in the mid-twentieth century.'
16. See, for example, Min (1999).

altogether in whatever form. This differentiation is crucial to an understanding of how women's empowerment can be indigenously engendered from within, in a way that would dialogue creatively and productively with universalistic discourses on women's rights.

Especially in Indonesia and China, researchers are ascertaining women's understanding of power and empowerment in indirect ways, which will need to be made explicit in the planned comparative lexicon. In Indonesia, researchers find that more appropriate ways of entering into a conversation about 'empowerment' include inquiring about women's initiatives to improve their lives or asking women who they believe has 'power' *(kuasa)* and 'authority' *(kekuasaan),* rather than to use the misleading coinage, *pemberdayaan*. Similar approaches are being adopted in China. Nevertheless, it is important to note that these indirect approaches imply that whereas it is possible to discuss women's initiatives as they have happened, it is extremely difficult to discuss 'empowerment' as a concept. Other relevant concepts can be discussed relatively easily, such as power, rights and responsibilities. The proposed comparative lexicon will analyse how these various concepts inter-relate.

To arrive at a comparative lexicon, all WEMC researchers track, analyse and contextualise discourses on the overarching concern of how women can and do empower themselves in the face of disempowering forces. This documentation and analysis of usages, meanings and implications is critical for building new knowledge around women's empowerment. (It is equally critical for WEMC's communication and capacity building interventions.) Neither the lexicon nor the research is limited to women's views of empowerment and related issues; research also covers the views of policy makers, implementers, community leaders, as well as relevant discourses in the media and popular culture.

3.2. Core research questions

Starting with a contextual mapping of the gender systems and other power structures impacting on women's experiences, understanding and envisioning, WEMC has designed a set of core research questions under four themes of inquiry to address its overarching concern. By asking the same core of research questions across the different countries and contexts studied, we engage in an iterative process that enables comparative data to be obtained and analysed, throwing light

on the significance of the various conditions that lead to different results. These core research questions guide and shape WEMC's research across all sites.

1. **Women's views and analyses of power, disempowerment, empowerment**

   A. How do women interpret and analyse the disempowering forces they face?

      (i) At what levels of state and society are these disempowering forces located – macro, meso, micro – and in what contexts (e.g. formal/informal, religious/secular, state-related/societal)?

      (ii) In what ways do these disempowering forces converge with or diverge from each other?

      (iii) In what ways do these disempowering forces relate to specific policies and practices?

   B. What possibilities for empowerment do women envisage in their lived realities, in the face of disempowering forces?

      (i) What sources of power can they tap in their situations and in which areas of life?

      (ii) How do these sources of power differ according to gender and other attributes, such as religion, ethnicity, class, kinship, locality, etc.?

      (iii) Do these sources of power link in any way to specific state policies and practices?

2. **Women engaging in contestations of power around mechanisms of control used by disempowering forces**

   C. How do women address, resist and overcome the mechanisms of control used by disempowering forces?

      (i) How do women resist, escape from, and eliminate gender-based violence?

      (ii) How do women access and control available resources that constitute the building blocks of power? And how has this increased or decreased over time?

      (iii) How do women engage in gender-equitable interpretations or constructions of identity, culture and religion to legitimise their assertions of rights?

      (iv) How do women access state and non-state channels and forums to assert rights and make decisions for their individual and collective empowerment?

3. **Women's strategies for empowerment and the support they mobilise**

   D. How do women upscale their strategies for empowerment – from

individual, collective, organised to institutionalised levels? Under what circumstances do they downscale their initiatives – from institutionalised, organised, collective to individual levels?

- E. What sources of support are women able to mobilise for their empowerment?

  - (i) At what levels of state and society are these sources of support located – macro, meso, micro – and in what contexts (e.g. formal/informal, religious/secular, state-related/societal)?

  - (ii) What kinds of support have been provided to women?

  - (iii) What needs to change to increase support for women's initiatives, including changes to policies and practices?

4. Outcomes of women's initiatives for empowerment

- F. What are the outcomes of women's initiatives for empowerment? To what extent and in which areas of life are these changes occurring?

  - (i) Are women better able to assert their rights over their minds and bodies?

  - (ii) Are women better able to assert their rights as full and equal citizens?

  - (iii) Have disempowering forces been transformed and power relations re-structured to women's collective advantage?

  - (iv) Do these include changes in policies and practices?

An implicit narrative underlies these core questions as follows: constructions of power – power contestations – strategies for empowerment – outcomes. As shown in Chapter 2 above, women's empowerment necessarily occurs in the context of power relations. Research has to begin with the fact of women's disempowerment, which thereby necessitates their empowerment. If women were already powerful, they would not need to be empowered. Nor are women accidently powerless. Rather, they have been disempowered. To identify how women can be facilitated in their initiatives of finding paths for empowerment, it is necessary to first understand how women themselves interpret and analyse the disempowering forces they face as protagonists in their own lived realities.

While in theory there may be an implicit sequencing in this narrative, empirical field research reveals that the relevance of the thematic questions varies with women's different social realities and historical moments, requiring flexibility in the sequencing and manner of posing the questions. Context-specific variations notwithstanding, the core research questions constitute the basis for comparing and integrating WEMC work across diverse research sites.

A uniform set of questions guards against the potential risk of fragmentation, while

allowing research teams to structure their studies fairly autonomously according to the diverse contexts, variously picking up on key issues, which may or may not be pertinent to other contexts. Simultaneously, this core set of questions allows the varied answers, inevitably emerging from different contexts, to be compared on a common continuum so that divergence does not lead to disconnected trajectories.

The cross-cultural process of comparison and synthesis is pivotal for achieving the four WEMC objectives:

1. To document, analyse and multiply women's empowerment strategies that successfully transform structures of disempowerment

2. To make visible, validate and strengthen women's agency as insiders[17] challenging disempowering structures and promoting democratisation

3. To build analytical capacity and strategic alliances that catalyse transformative research and actions

4. To pinpoint ways whereby good governance, democratisation, and appropriate development can strengthen and support women's agency

3.2.1. Women's views and analyses of power, disempowerment, empowerment

Research Question A: How do women interpret and analyse the disempowering forces they face?

Research Question B: What possibilities for empowerment do women envisage in their lived realities, in the face of disempowering forces?

Question A and related sub-questions launch the narrative of disempowerment from women's perspectives. Women's identification, description and analyses of the forces that disempower them, opens the way for further exploration about these forces, including the location of these at different levels in state and society (micro, meso, macro) and in different contexts (e.g. formal/informal, religious/secular, state-related/societal), as well as their convergence and divergence with each other,

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17. 'Insider' and 'outsider' are relative concepts. For WEMC, 'insiders' include all women living in Muslim contexts that are being studied, including non-Muslim women in such contexts. 'Outsiders' are those outside these contexts.

and their linkage to specific policies and practices. In keeping with WEMC's overall framework, the focus is on the meso level – that is, localised contexts of power, starting with the family and community, where local state actors, para-state actors and non-state actors operate, in contestation or alliance.

Question B and related sub-questions constitute the logical next step in the search for paths to women's empowerment. If women harbour no hope for their own empowerment in their present circumstances, it is unlikely that they would exercise agency to claim rights and empower themselves since they would see any such attempt as doomed to failure, even if they can identify and indeed analyse the forces that disempower. As argued above, women can be empowered only through their own agency – that is, through their own processes and cycles of reflections, decisions and actions as subjects of their own empowerment. It follows that women must believe there is some chance for success in acting for their empowerment. Those seeking to support and amplify women's initiatives need to know what options women envisage for themselves in their lived realities, in the face of the disempowering forces they will need to overcome.

Of equal importance is eliciting women's assessments of potential sources of support for their proposed or actual endeavour. This includes understanding what sources of power women identify as available or needed in their particular situations, and which of these sources are seen as exercising more influence. For example, do women see the following as sources of power: education, income, land/home ownership, religious knowledge, going on *hajj* (pilgrimage), having children (if so, sons or daughters)? Which source of power would have greater leverage in which aspects of their lives? Do they believe these sources of power are accessible to all women or restricted to some – for example, based on gender and other attributes, such as religion, ethnicity, class, kinship, locality? Tracking the possible linkages between these sources of power and specific state policies and practices would shed light on the appropriateness of potential measures.

Answers to questions A and B, concerning women's reflections and analyses of power, disempowerment and empowerment, including related aspects of gender and authority, will provide critical insights on how best to approach questions C, D and E, which focus on women's strategies in power contestations.

3.2.2. Women engaging in contestations of power around mechanisms of control used by disempowering forces

Research Question C: How do women address, resist and overcome the mechanisms of control used by disempowering forces?

Most crucially, Question C and related sub-questions illuminate power contestations between women and the forces that disempower them. Conscious that disempowerment entails social, cultural, economic and political processes, as much as empowerment does, we have identified four key mechanisms of control used by disempowering forces in women's lives. Power contestations ensue when women resist these mechanisms of control, with crucial outcomes that either enhance or impede women's empowerment.

Table 2: Four key power contestations

Mechanisms of control used by disempowering forces	Versus	Strategies for empowerment used by women in assertions of their rights
1. Various forms of gender-based violence		1. Resistance to, escape from and elimination of gender-based violence
2. Restrictions on women accessing and controlling resources that constitute the building blocks of power		2. Increased access to and control over resources that constitute the building blocks of power, thereby bringing about more gender-equitable resource distribution
3. Exclusion of women from channels of power and forums of decision-making		3. Enhanced access to and use of these channels and forums to assert rights and make decisions
4. Misogynistic interpretations of culture and religion used to legitimise women's disempowerment, while de-legitimising their empowerment		4. Women's gender-equitable interpretations or constructions of culture and religion to legitimise their assertions of rights, thereby transforming newly acquired power into socially accepted authority

Power contestation 1:
Addressing violence as a mechanism of control

Gender based violence, the first mechanism of control, includes actual and threatened, interpersonal and systemic forms of violence. The use of violence by disempowering forces makes it dangerous for women to exercise agency as autonomous persons. Examples of various forms of violence uncovered by our research include:

a)   State sanctioned violence through law and the legalisation of violence as punishment (e.g. legal provisions for whipping, amputations and stoning to death in Pakistan and Iran, as well as 'sweepings'[18] and whippings in Indonesia)

b)   Family laws undermining women's rights may result in or promote acts of interpersonal violence (in Iran, Pakistan and Indonesia)

c)   The invisible operation of norms, values and thinking prescribed by customs, practices and/or 'sharia' in the everyday life of Muslim communities, curtailing women's autonomy, as well as physical and social mobility (e.g. female genital mutilation in Indonesia, compulsory scarf in Iran and parts of Indonesia, constraints on women's physical and social mobility in China)

d)   Violence inflicted by para-state actors, such as politico-religious groups (in Indonesia and Pakistan)

e)   The silencing of women and even researchers about the incidence of gender-based violence, with any communication about such violence seen as a threat to communal interests, thereby potentially inviting yet more violence (among some Muslims in China)[19]

It is essential to focus on the pervasive and systemic forms of gender-based violence because these tend to normalise violence against women as the entitlement of men, society and the state, while also legitimising interpersonal forms of violence. Research in Pakistan suggests that the desire to exercise control over women's sexuality underlies violence as a mechanism of control, particularly – but not only – evident in the responses of male respondents. Violence and the control of women's sexuality tie in with particular concepts of masculinity and

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18.   The term 'sweeping' (used as an English loan word) is derived from the Indonesian military usage for flushing out rebels and subversives in a demarcated area.

19.   Research by Lanzhou University, Gansu.

manhood that also need to be explored.[20] Eliciting how women counter violence as a key mechanism of control, especially as control over their sexuality – how they resist, escape from and try to eliminate the violence visited on them – is therefore of crucial importance.

A holistic approach is required to document women's choices, discourses and strategies in response to gender-based violence as a form of control. In Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan, and cross-border research, the legal system is examined both as an obstruction that reinforces inequitable gendered power systems and tolerates gender-based violence, and as a potential support with laws that can be and are used to protect women from violence. Our research interrogates women's use of and response to legal systems, as well as alternative mechanisms of redress, including the exploration of how these may be used effectively to address gender-based violence. In Pakistan, a major concern is how state responses to gender-based violence, such as shelters for women, can be made more effective. In Indonesia and elsewhere, tensions between secular laws and interpretations rendered by local 'sharia' courts and institutions constitute a primary focus.[21] The research also analyses women's responses to their local political, legal, cultural, social and historical specificities as contexts that either support or obstruct their ability to make safe and effective choices.

Power contestation 2:
Overcoming restrictions on women's access to and control of resources

Disempowering forces impose restrictions on women's access to and control of resources to impede their access to the building blocks of power. WEMC research focuses on three key resources:

a) Health – access to conditions for good health and well-being, health-related services, information and knowledge, especially concerning reproductive health, social and cultural beliefs surrounding women's health, and so on

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20. Research by Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre.
21. Research by Semarak Cerlang Nusa.

b) Economic – access to livelihoods and employment (including overseas employment), control over income and assets, and so on

c) Educational – access to schooling, information and knowledge (e.g. publications, legal information etc.), social and cultural resources (e.g. religious knowledge), and so on

These are key resources because they provide the foundations for women's lives, livelihoods and knowledge. Deprived of these, women are severely hampered when they wish to exercise agency as autonomous persons. So the question is how women manage to access and exercise control over such resources in the face of disempowering forces.

A separate question is whether improved access to such resources enables women to become empowered and, should this be the case, whether their empowerment in one social sector can be transferred to, or facilitates the process in, another sector. Research needs to investigate how increased access to one specific type of resource impacts on women's perceptions of self, as well as their access to other resources. Our focus is on the use of these resources as building blocks of power, not on the accumulation of these resources merely as social goods. The crux of the matter lies in the use of any available resources for advancing particular agendas of power. The question then is whether, under what conditions, and how women use their increased access to resources as building blocks for empowerment. A wider question impacting on the gender system is whether such an empowerment initiative is carried out for an individual's benefit or for women's collective interests. WEMC's research in Guangzhou, China indicates that even when women are successful in their careers, their individual empowerment does not necessarily translate into collective benefits for other women or for women as a collectivity.[22]

Health resources

WEMC seeks to understand (i) women's views of which resources they consider necessary for their good health and well-being, (ii) whether they have sufficient access to such resources, (iii) whether their access is hampered by particular disempowering forces, and (iv) what initiatives women take to gain access to health resources. Health resources are linked to issues of violence against women, including the resources that women would need to prevent and recover from physical and psychological damage. A central concern in the Pakistan health

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22. Research by Southeast Asia Research Centre.

research is that of equity. Issues of equity have been a concern in the international development discourse for two decades, but in 2003 the establishment of the World Health Organisation Commission on the Social Determinants of Health catapulted equity into the foreground with new official legitimisation. From the perspective of women's empowerment, equity analysis is crucial because it helps to unearth and focus attention on the systems that create inequities/disparities underlying health differentials, rather than eliciting health indicators at a particular moment of time. A relative term, equity necessitates comparison between groups differently situated in terms of mortality and social determinants; it does so by using stratifiers determined by each society. The fulcrum for such stratifiers is collective belonging which may be determined, among other factors, by gender, class, ethnicity, religion, minority/majority population. Any preventable negative outcome is deemed unfair so that the concern about inequities is closely linked to issues of 'fairness'. An analysis of inequities conducted at the community level catalyses a process of reflection and analysis which, in turn, provides the base for potential action for change.

Vulnerability in health relates not only to the risk factors emanating from biological conditions but to social vulnerabilities. Research analyses vulnerabilities stemming from factors such as gender, poverty, race, ethnicity, and geographical locations to highlight the sources of inequities.[23] Seeking answers to what would enable a reorientation of health service provision as well as a social transformation, research explores the implications of the poverty-health nexus in the light of inequities impeding women's well being. From the perspective of governance, research investigates the impact of the devolution reforms on health and equity and how planning and financing health services can be made more supportive of women's empowerment processes.

A key aspect of the process is to facilitate women's analysis of the power dynamics operating in their communities. Conducting equity analysis enables women to note inequities in their community and to prioritise which particular inequity (inequities) they believe most urgently needs to be reduced. Simultaneously, women are facilitated to interrogate government policies in the light of their analysis of their lived realities. This collective reflection-discussion-exchange helps women to articulate the concerns, information and recommendations they would like to convey to different sectors and levels of government. Resulting data will enable WEMC to pinpoint the control mechanisms operating in the area of health, as compared with other areas of life, and to investigate whether a reduction of the control mechanisms restricting women's access to health resources (e.g. through greater physical mobility) enables them to re-negotiate other aspects of their lives.[24]

Research in Indonesia and with Indonesian migrant workers studies the impact of

23. Kausar S. Khan, 'Equity and Poverty: Non-threatening entry & challenging the status quo'. Unpublished WEMC research paper.
24. Research by the Department of Community Health Sciences, Aga Khan University.

Islamist discourses and control mechanisms on women's reproductive health. Women migrant workers' health issues are frequently ignored by the Indonesian government, despite the fact that these workers are a significant source of foreign revenue. Migrant women's concerns also tend to be sidelined by conventional women's movements. In addition to assessing state failure in addressing these concerns and dealing with migrant workers' health issues at the level of seriousness they deserve, the research is documenting gaps in government polices, as well as identifying and supporting workers' initiatives and strategies.[25] In China, Iran and Pakistan, the research is investigating whether health presents a somewhat less contentious domain with greater possibilities for women's agency, even if due only to functional reasons, in that patriarchal households, communities and states would need even subservient women to have a minimal level of health if they are to fulfil their assigned tasks of economic production, social and biological reproduction. In this case, do women themselves leverage their relative access to health resources or mobility for health purposes to exercise greater agency beyond the domain of health?

This last possibility is interrogated by comparing case studies. The first case study in Iran looks at how a government scheme of women volunteer health workers had the unintended outcome of providing women volunteers with opportunities to exercise agency beyond the domain of health, enabling them to play far broader roles in responding to the needs of community women, than was ever planned. The research investigates how the self-strengthened role of volunteer workers has catalysed changes in their own lives, changes among the community women they are working with, and the potential for such changes to outlive the scheme in question.[26]

A second case study in Pakistan revolves around the government's Lady Health Workers scheme that inducted some 60,000 women. Research pinpoints the implications for women's empowerment, including changes brought about among the health workers themselves and the impact of their presence and increased mobility on the perceptions and dynamics of gendered power in their locations. This is complemented by a contrasting case study that examines how nurses are disempowered by social attitudes and practices regarding nurses within the health sector and in society at large. Research tracks nurses' own initiatives to challenge and change the disempowering forces they face and traces the ripple effects that nurses' disempowerment and their initiatives to empower themselves have on their patients.[27]

Researchers in Gansu, China, have found that even where local governments have started to set up basic clinics for some of the most disadvantaged Muslim

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25. Research by the Centre for Environment, Gender and Development.
26. Research by Women Living Under Muslim Laws and colleagues.
27. Research by the Department of Community Health Sciences, Aga Khan University.

communities, the most needy members of these communities, women, do not have access to them. Cultural taboos, dressed up as Islamic precepts, bar women from entering 'unclean' (gender-mixed) spaces and from seeking out doctors. Provision of 'safe' spaces by WEMC researchers for meetings with local women is providing a first discursive space for discussions about feelings of 'fear' and about the nature of local 'obstructions' that women face. Only on the basis of such close and 'grounded' involvement can there be facilitation of change, which takes into account individual and communal habitual interpretations, without violating the agency of muted women. Ethnographic and life testimony methodologies are important for tracking of social change in complex environments.[28]

Economic resources

Access to and control over economic resources play a foundational role in women's empowerment. Different research teams are investigating women's strategies for accessing and controlling economic resources in the face of disempowering forces.

In China, economic opportunities and constraints are being variously assessed by women in very different Muslim communities, in relation to external factors (such as geo-politics and ethno-religious membership vis-à-vis the state as a driver of particular development agendas), as well as factors internal to the community (such as gender, age and class) or to a particular Muslim tradition. Given the diverse ethnic groups that constitute Muslim populations in China, and the impact of varying economic, cultural and religious conditions, careful empirical investigation is based on grounded and specific case studies, with clear criteria for comparative analyses.

In Iran, the research looks at women seeking economic empowerment through the formal and informal economy, including cooperatives, and economic networks. Cooperatives and networking are reviewed from the perspective of women organising around economic resources as a means of changing gender relations. Additionally, the interface of access to education and economic resources is examined by comparing educated women, who prioritise economic independence as key to self-empowerment, with women who are obliged to work in order to survive.

Running through the various research components of WEMC are women's

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28. Research by the International Gender Studies, Oxford University and colleagues in Lanzhou University, Gansu.

perceptions and understandings of poverty, with its gendered impact and the need for economic security as critical elements. Partners in China are particularly interested in documenting women's own understanding of poverty, including the impact of depleted social capital and dislocation.[29] At the same time, their understanding interacts with Government policies, the state's conception of poverty, social safety networks and the role, if any, that principles of equality and equity play in translating policies into action. The Chinese context is particularly complex given the dual structure of government (central/State and ethnic administrations) in areas designated for 'ethnic minorities', as is the case with most of our research sites. Tensions are not infrequently resolved at the expense of women's rights and interests.

Research in Pakistan elucidates women's definitions and understandings of 'poverty' and the importance they assign to economic resources as a cause for unequal gendered relations, as a means of exercising control, and as a potential route to empowerment. Comparing different categories of women earning cash income with those who do not earn cash, will illuminate the interface of access to economic resources and empowerment. The differentiated impacts of various types of gainful employment are being analysed to see whether the nature of work itself impedes or enhances the likelihood of empowerment strategies. The government's poverty reduction strategy and the new gender-responsive budgeting scheme are being examined to see whether policies respond to the expressed needs of women.[30]

Educational resources

The target for Millennium Development Goal 3 (MDG3): 'Promote gender equality and empower women's empowerment' is to 'eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015.'[31] Our concern with educational resources goes beyond enrolment. Indeed, as pointed out at a WEMC forum,[32] even when policies seek to increase girls' enrolment in schools, these do not deal with male-biased gender systems at micro and meso levels, leading parents, including mothers, to invest in

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29. Research is conducted among some of the most disadvantaged Muslim minorities in Northwest China: Dongxiang and Baoan nationalities.

30. Research by Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre.

31. See http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/gender.shtml

32. The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) presented the Research Programme Consortium on Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts (WEMC) at a Forum entitled, 'Where's the Power in Women's Empowerment?', on 4 August 2008, at the United Nations Conference Centre in Bangkok. See http://www.unescap.org/ESID/GAD/Events/WEMC-Forum/index.asp

the schooling of sons at the expense of daughters. Given the prevalence of such systemic disempowerment, our focus is on whether and how girls' and women's access to and use of educational resources as building blocks of power can transform gendered power relations, rather than simply on the increase of girls' enrolment in school.

WEMC compares the divergent opportunities for girls' and women's empowerment provided by different educational systems – state sponsored versus private, secular versus religious. Research extends to informal modes of education, such as legal awareness and voters' education (for example, in Indonesia and Pakistan), and such as citizenship and vocational education offered by women-led (private) Muslim schools (for example, in China).[33]

In Pakistan, education is being considered from the perspective of women's own initiatives. One case study is of two young sisters who started teaching other neighbourhood children, when they themselves were just schoolchildren in Class 4 and Class 6. Now aged 20 and 18, the sisters run a street school for some 500 students. The question being asked is the extent to which their unquestionably successful initiative for education translates into empowerment for themselves, their co-teachers and the community. A second case study concerns a woman who successfully pioneered education for girls in her remote area of Balochistan – in the process, defying social norms, contesting the parameters of the education scheme she is involved with, and, what is more, negotiating with her own family to delay her marriage until she succeeded in her endeavour. In this case, an important question is whether she is seen as too defiant to serve as an immediate model to emulate, even though she has opened the way for girls' education in the area.

In Afghanistan, girls' education became a political focus of contestations between different regimes, after it was forcibly promoted during the pro-Soviet period and then banned under the Taliban. WEMC documents Afghan women's successful strategising to gain access to educational resources in different circumstances – as refugees with underground schools in Iran and as returnees to Afghanistan. The research is looking at how women define and redefine the position of women within their family, community and in public life, including analyses of the outcomes and implications of their strategies to change societal perceptions of gendered roles.

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33. Research by WEMC-IGS colleagues in Henan, central China.

Power contestation 3:
Accessing channels of power and decision-making forums

The third mechanism of control is women's exclusion from channels of power and forums of decision-making that simultaneously deprives women of opportunities to articulate their concerns, priorities and needs, and blocks access to important channels for influencing state and society. Research investigates how women challenge, overcome, or by-pass barriers to access formal and non-formal decision-making forums, structures and processes. At the state level, this includes the political and administrative arenas (e.g. political parties, membership, positions in local government). Within this ambit, the research explores how intersections of state governance and non-formal parallel systems of local governance based on customary laws, impact on women's empowerment processes, and with what implications for their mobility and decision-making.

Legal provisions and policies for women, as well as the legal treatment of women's rights, are of particular relevance as these institutionalise access or barriers to women in general and groups of women in particular – for example, those belonging to ethnic and religious minorities, who are subjected to another layer of laws and policies. Key policies and laws have been identified by each research component. Researchers in Iran, Pakistan and Indonesia share a focus on political processes. In Indonesia, the overarching research theme, focusing on women's engagement in contestations between political Islamism and the democratisation movement, examines spaces opening up for women through democratisation, as well as those being closed through the actions of political actors.

In Iran, where the formal political process has opened up spaces for women from local to national levels, the research traces how women strategise for political engagement, individually and collectively, despite the constraints within which they have to operate. Mindful that the impact of political participation is not limited to women who are successful candidates, the research is exploring what losing elections has meant to women, how this impacts on their lives and on women in their constituencies.

Of particular interest in Pakistan is the impact of the affirmative action measure under local government that has brought tens of thousands of women into the political process. Mostly newcomers without previous political experience, these women are located and operate within the critical meso level. Among the questions posed are what this has meant for the women entering the local tier of government, what strategies they have employed to increase their voice in the proceedings,

whether and how such actions relate to a women's empowerment agenda, and the extent to which local women representatives (councillors) constitute a source of support for their women constituents.

Because significant decision-making takes place outside the formal political process, WEMC's research extends to non-formal and non-state institutions of local governance, as well as women's contestations over and for public spaces. Contestations are manifested through female dress codes, as well as women's mobility and presence in public spaces. How are women's appearance and clothing being regulated and by whom? What methods do women use to incrementally push for change or to subvert demands for conformity? To what extent do actions taken by women, individually, collectively or in organised fashion, challenge the power structure? Also being investigated are women's strategies to protect or enhance women's presence in public spaces – for example, through demonstrations, participation in transnational and local sporting events, reclaiming parks, use of different media, such as Web sites.

In Indonesia, the research tracks women's mobility in public spaces related to appearance, behaviour and social interactions. An important moment will be the 2009 general elections, an upcoming watershed, for which women's strategic participation, political education and organised lobbying will be crucial for setting future directions for the country.[34]

Cross-border research with/on Indonesian migrant workers has identified the inter-penetration of public and private interests in labour migration as a key challenge for migrant workers. While Indonesian law is surprisingly progressive in some respects with regards to women's rights, the translation of these laws in everyday life, particularly for migrant women, is very problematic. As a result, migrant women workers have focused on contesting policies, administrative regulations, and the practices of government bodies, rather than on laws *per se*, especially when these policies, regulations and practices impose disempowering constructions on migrant workers' rights as 'Muslim women'.

Cross-border research on Afghan refugees and returnees reviews the experience of women's participation in and mobilising for influence in the *loya jirga* process, the constitution-making process, and family laws.

In China, women's indigenous traditions of spatial occupation, including the implications of women's own spaces (e.g. schools, mosques, traditional women's *cha'i* associations) are being studied as sites for identity-constructions, for sensitisation to issues of power and resource allocation, for challenges to mainstream constructions of women as belonging to the 'inner' *(nei)* realm, and for the assumption of positions of authority. Furthermore, the co-existence of diverse political spaces in China, whereby ethnicity, religion, and geography are

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34. Research by Solidaritas Perempuan, Semarak Cerlang Nusa, their colleagues and the Southeast Asia Centre for Research, City University, Hong Kong.

inscribed into state categories of belonging and concomitant entitlements, has led to an important research/activist focus on alliance-building across divisive identity markers. Research conducted in Northwest China explores the implications of such alliances, formed outside the state-sponsored Women's Federation, for women's political representation and for the creation of civil society space.

Power contestation 4:
Combating the legitimisation of women's disempowerment and the de-legitimisation of their empowerment

The fourth mechanism of control lies in the modes of legitimisation, including misogynistic interpretations of culture and religion, which are used to legitimise women's disempowerment and simultaneously de-legitimise their empowerment. Among the forces using this mechanism of control are political Islamists who claim that religion itself sanctions women's disempowerment. They are by no means the only ones to de-legitimise women's empowerment; others do so in the name of 'culture', 'nation', 'tradition', or 'heritage'. Indeed, legitimisations are inherent in all arrangements of power, so that this mechanism underlies and accompanies the other mechanisms of control. Too frequently ignored in research on empowerment, legitimisation is a critical ingredient to maintaining the status quo, which needs to be interrogated since questioning the legitimacy of existing arrangements of power is a necessary first step for rejecting the disempowering forces so legitimated.

The sources of legitimacy and modes of legitimisation across research sites are explored by interrogating the cultural, political, economic, religious and secular sources of legitimisation that can confer authority either on forces disempowering women or on women empowering themselves. Sources of legitimisation and accompanying contestations are intricately linked with constructions of individual and collective identity – self-generated and imposed – that serve to either legitimise or de-legitimise women's empowerment. At least three sets of issues are being studied:

    a)   The role, use and different interpretations of culture and religion, including oral and textual traditions, as reference points for promoting either an enabling or a disabling environment for women's

empowerment in different contexts

b) Competing value systems and the use of 'history' as justification – both by disempowering forces and by women to empower themselves

c) Different bodies of law: women's access to and use of these, including state laws, as well as non-formalised but highly structured customary practices that have law-like status, some said to be derived from Islam and others derived from elsewhere

Our research documents women's ability to negotiate and break out of existing disempowering moulds and patterns, through the innovative use of symbolic resources – historical, ideological, cultural, religious, charismatic, hybrid, and so on. This may entail elaborating alternatives to mainstream constructions of past and future by (i) reclaiming suppressed history, and (ii) envisioning alternative collective futures.

In China, the research looks at current tensions between Muslim women's identity constructions, arising as in central China from a tradition of women's own space and leadership, local patriarchal interpretations of Islam (including the claims of a 'fundamentlist blueprint'), and a socialist paradigm of development that is secular and oriented towards a science-based modernism. The focus in Pakistan is on the denial of legal entitlements to women through customary beliefs and practices, on the lacunae in formal laws, and on the tensions between customary practices and formal laws. With a view to identifying points of leverage that could best support women's access to rights, the research seeks to pinpoint which factors impede or support women's access to legal rights (e.g. lack of information about state laws, inadequate access to existing state structures, the overwhelming hold of traditional practices and processes). In this, an important aspect is community perceptions of the legitimacy of state laws versus that of customary practices. A second critical aspect is to compare alternative forums for dispute resolution, newly sponsored by the state, and those created by women's own initiatives for justice.

Under the rubric of the umbrella issue in Indonesia (women's empowerment in the context of contestations between politicised Islam and democratisation), the research examines:

a) The imposition of disempowering identity constructions on women through the formalisation of 'sharia law' through by-laws and local regulations at provincial, district and, increasingly, village levels

b) Women's resistance to these disempowering constructions in urban and rural contexts, including recourse to the Constitution and supportive national laws, as well as to gender-equitable interpretations of Islam and local cultures [35]

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35. Research by Solidaritas Perempuan, Semarak Cerlang Nusa, their colleagues and the Southeast Asia Centre for Research, City University, Hong Kong.

The research with/on Indonesian migrant workers focuses on how regimes of so-called 'protection', insisted for them by the state (under pressure from public/religious sources) are at the heart of some of the most exploitative and oppressive practices that Indonesian women migrants encounter. The legitimisation of such regimes in the name of supposed 'Muslim-ness' makes the exploitation particularly difficult to eradicate.

The cross-border research on Afghan refugees examines the key role education has played in stimulating competing discourses around constructions of Afghan women in different political circumstances. Another aspect of this research is the contestations over women's rights, roles and responsibilities, especially in the area of legal reforms in personal status law.

Intersecting mechanisms of control

The mechanisms of control identified by WEMC are not mutually exclusive but work in tandem. Women experience the combined effect of the various mechanisms, rather than the sequential impact of one mechanism after another. The lack of access to resources – in particular, economic resources – undermines women's decision-making powers, reinforcing their exclusion from decision-making forums. The lack of economic resources increases vulnerability to gender-based violence and also negatively impacts on women's decision-making over their own bodies, for instance, in terms of contraceptive choices, as shown by Panda and Agarwal (2005) and Agarwal and Panda (2007).

Women's access to resources, such as health facilities or educational and employment opportunities, is obstructed by the legitimacy given to rules that prohibit or control women's presence in public spaces. Beneath society's acceptance of gender-based violence, women's poorer health and economic deprivation lie processes of legitimisation that promote women's disempowerment as 'natural' or 'god-ordained', causing such views to be internalised as immutable among women as well men. Reviewing violence as a mechanism of control, WEMC has produced and disseminated a Strategy Paper *Rejecting 'cultural' justifications for violence against women: strategies for women's rights advocates,* which identifies ten strategies for countering 'cultural' excuses for violence against women.[36] Such interconnections

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36. This can be downloaded from http://www.wemc.com.hk/web/culture_and_VAW.htm

between the mechanisms of control are evident in WEMC's research findings.

In Indonesia, matrilineal communities have traditionally given women strong land rights and control over natural resources, but this is now threatened by political Islamist encroachment, which is strengthening growing male dominance. Struggles over land are becoming part of the political tensions between secular and religious actors, including state, para-state and non-state actors. The aggressive advance of a singular disempowering identity, at the expense of complex layered identities, is reducing Indonesian women's existing economic rights and assets. Even women migrant workers, working outside the country, are being disempowered by Islamist claims on them as supposedly vulnerable women needing male guardians and by the Islamist legitimisation of patriarchal practices, such as polygyny, that have far-reaching implications for women's livelihoods.

The research teams for Indonesia and Indonesian migrant workers are focusing on how women are counteracting these Islamist constraints, and how they are increasing their access to and control over vital resources. WEMC is thus studying women's discourses, strategies and modes of organising for achieving this. The opportunities and constraints of migration as an economic strategy are also being examined for international and internal migrants.

3.2.3. Women's strategies for empowerment and the support they mobilise

Research Question D: How do women upscale their strategies for empowerment – from individual, collective, organised to institutionalised levels? Under what circumstances do women downscale their initiatives?

Research Question E: What sources of support are women able to mobilise for their empowerment?

Question D seeks to uncover knowledge of how women strategise for their empowerment and how they upscale strategies from individual empowerment to collective, organised and institutionalised empowerment in ways that engage and benefit women as a collectivity. Conversely, what circumstances oblige women to downscale initiatives from institutionalised to organised, from organised to *ad hoc,*

and from collective to individual? Answers derive from analyses of data gathered for preceding questions (A, B and C), as well as from data obtained explicitly about empowerment strategies.

Having identified the sites of women's organising, (public and private, formal and informal, religious and secular sites), the research findings help to elucidate the dynamics and impact of women organising as women-exclusive associations, within general self-help or advocacy groups, and as part of alliances and coalitions. We seek to understand what leads women to opt for one choice or the other, the impact of their choices on the issues addressed, women's ability to articulate their own needs and opinions, as well as the possibilities for women's roles as leaders and advocates of new initiatives. Which interventions or circumstances have been pivotal to women's successful organising? How have women gained entry into (which) institutions and influenced (which) discourses?

Women's movements are a key focus of WEMC's research across all research components, with an emphasis on culturally rooted women's movements as important indigenous vehicles for:

- Advocating women's rights and supportive laws
- Promoting women's equal citizenship
- Resisting the incursion of political Islamism

The inner workings of these movements, in terms of complex internal power relations, class differences, and the hegemonic potential of leadership positions, are important for assessing their capacities to address the challenges of disempowering forces effectively.

Women's leadership – their exercise of power and authority for individual and collective interests – that is so pivotal to movement building, is highlighted through case studies of women exercising agency in leadership positions: religious and secular, formal and informal. Uncovering what 'female leadership in Muslim contexts' means and implies, the research documents and analyses current forms of accepted leadership and women's contestations for expanded leadership roles, in different areas of life and among a variety of different constituencies. Related to this are the sources of existing authority, as well as the innovative, often contested, authority created by women for their own leadership. In terms of legitimisation and role models, historical linkages and legitimation can be retrieved by women in contemporary contexts. In China, Pakistan and Indonesia, women's histories provide illustrations of creative challenges to social constructions of womanhood and society imposed by opportunistic patriarchs. The research also seeks the seeds of systemic alternatives in women's empowerment by eliciting women's envisioning of collective futures.

Women's use of resources as building blocks of power (Question C) is equally significant. When women do manage to exercise control over resources, the question

remains of the use to which these are put. Do they benefit only individual women who have gained access to and control over these resources or are such resources pooled as collective social capital for the greater good of women as a collectivity?

Across all research components, one key ingredient consistently identified by women as crucial for their capacity to organise is their access to autonomous spaces. Without spaces of their own to discuss, plan, and organise, they are limited to identifying and finding individual solutions to their daily problems. For example, among Indonesian migrant workers, spaces in civil society enabling those in Hong Kong to organise autonomously have greatly enhanced their collective role in political processes in both sending and receiving countries. In contrast, the lack of civil society spaces in Macau and Taiwan has resulted in weak or no autonomous organising and thus an insignificant collective presence in the public sphere. In China, where more obvious forms of organising may be perceived as problematic, women seek 'safe spaces' that allow them to gather around acceptable activities, including research, handicrafts, health, and small business.

Case studies of women organising encompass the following:

- Strategies to protect or take public spaces
- Initiatives in the legal arena to address violence against women
- Organising around inequities, health and women's rights
- Expanding access to and control over economic resources
- Catalysing empowerment through discussions and collective actions

A parallel stream of investigation compares diverse forms of organising, questioning whether there are differences between women organising as part of general associations versus women-exclusive associations, between organising as part of social movements and organising as distinct and smaller community based-organisations.

Question D relates directly to Question E, which focuses on the sources of support women manage to mobilise for their empowerment. Answers will help to pinpoint the nature and form of support that would be most useful for women's empowerment in the short, medium and long term. It is obviously important to differentiate between specific sources of support needing to be mobilised to overcome particular sources of obstruction. Moreover, the identification of actors, resources and institutions supportive of women requires a policy assessment framework at national and provincial levels to understand the discourse and content of policies of relevance to women and to track policy implementation, especially at the meso level. Applied across different research components, the framework will enable a comparative analysis of policies, legal initiatives and administrative regulations as sources of potential support or hindrance for women's empowerment.

3.2.4. Outcomes of women's initiatives for empowerment

Research Question F: What are the outcomes of women's initiatives for empowerment? To what extent and in which areas of life are these changes occurring?

Question F and its related sub-questions put the whole picture together by focusing on the outcomes of women's initiatives. This may be illustrated as follows:
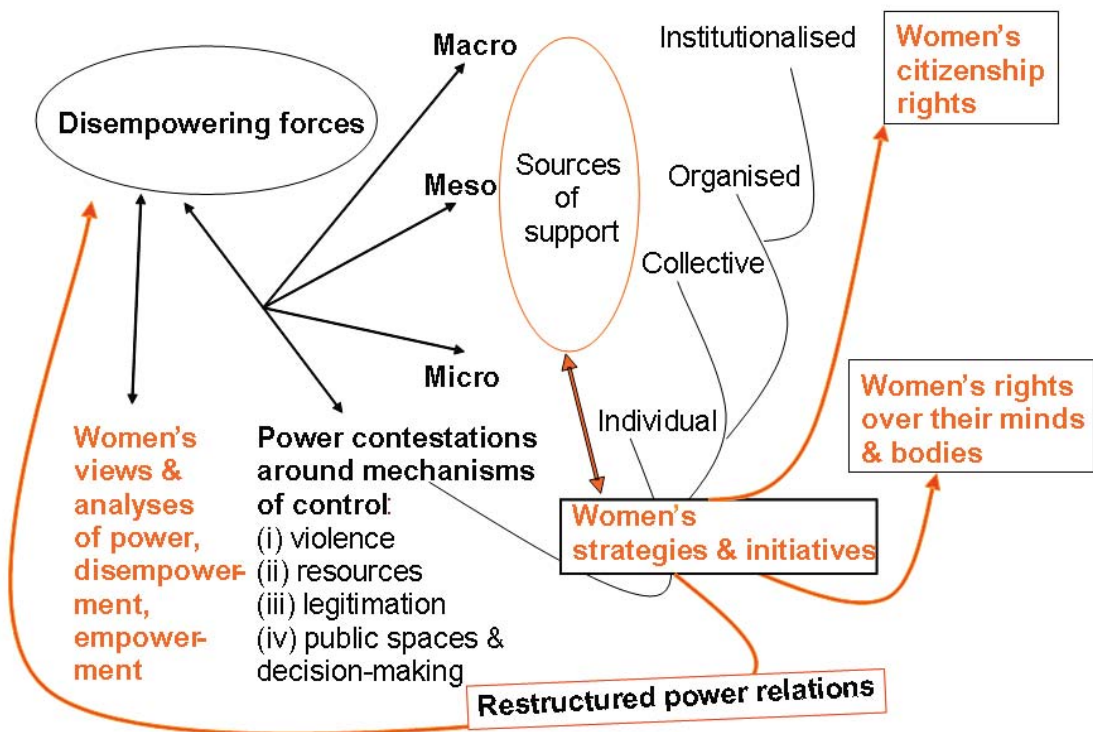
Diagram 4: The process of empowerment

If we read the picture from left to right, we can trace the following narrative:

1. Women have their own views and analyses of power, disempowerment, empowerment. Not only do women identify, describe and analyse the disempowering forces that figure prominently in their lived realities, they also identify future possibilities for empowerment

2. Disempowering forces are variously located at macro, meso and micro levels. WEMC research focuses on meso-level forces, the existence and significance of which tend to be overlooked, with the meso level defined as starting from the family and including non-state social institutions

3. Women are engaged in power contestations around the mechanisms of control – violence, resources, public spaces, decision-making and legitimation

4. To resist, escape from and overcome these mechanisms of control, women use strategies and undertake initiatives that can be upscaled from the individual level to collective, organised and institutionalised, loosely correlated with the micro, meso and macro levels. Vice-versa, initiatives can also be downscaled

5. In their initiatives for empowerment, women mobilise sources of support that are located at micro, meso and macro levels

6. These views and analyses, power contestations, strategies and initiatives, as well as the support mobilised, culminate in a particular set of outcomes, if empowerment is deemed to have been achieved. As defined above, 'empowerment is an increased capacity to make autonomous decisions that transform unfavourable power relations'.

Three specific outcomes are identified as manifestations of transforming unfavourable power relations:

a) **Women's greater assertion of their rights over their minds and bodies:** we see this as mostly a micro-level outcome. It is essential to focus on women's minds as well as bodies, because women must reflect, analyse and decide before they can act for their own empowerment. Women's initiatives to exercise freedom of thought and expressions are being studied along with initiatives to ensure bodily integrity and personal control over sexuality, mobility, dressing, everyday behaviour, their own labour, reproductive rights, and so on. Furthermore, women's rights over their minds and bodies are pivotal to their citizenship rights: without the former, it is difficult to exercise the latter.

b) **Women's greater assertion of their rights as full and equal citizens:** we see this as mostly a macro-level outcome. Analyses encompass the conditions, nature and impact of women's

interactions not only with state institutions but also with the sub-state, para-state and non-state actors standing between women and the state. WEMC examines tensions between women as 'citizens' and women as members of non-state social collectivities, including family, kin group, ethnic group, local community, and religious grouping. We ask whether women's exercise of citizenship rights actually leads them to become rights claimants who engage in the politics of making the state accountable, and if not, why not. What other factors are at play that prevent this from happening? Have women's discourses and strategies for empowerment, based on equal citizenship, managed to counter the agendas of religio-nationalism and ethno-nationalism, and with what degree of success? Finally, WEMC seeks to trace linkages to politicised, globalising Islamist forces and forces of globalisation, in terms of their impact on women's empowerment initiatives, as well as constructions of state, citizenship rights, and gender.

c)   **Restructured power relations that transform disempowering forces to women's collective advantage:** we see this as mostly a meso-level outcome. WEMC argues that women's empowerment must result in reconfigurations of inequitable power relations in favour of a more gender-equitable, democratising society.

Learning to learn

Scenes from training workshops for WEMC researchers in China (picture 1), Hong Kong (picture 2), Pakistan (picture 3) and Indonesia (picture 4)

*Building the women's
movement in Iran*

Iran

Strategising for change: the Women's Day arrests

There had been a call for a rally in front of the Majlis (Parliament) to mark the 8 March celebration of the International Women's Day, and to call for gender equality. Not coincidentally, a few days before 8 March, court cases were reopened for many women leaders who had been arrested on 12 June 2006 at a rally. In a show of solidarity, many of the leaders of the movement, including prominent leaders who had not supported the street rally at the time, such as Mahbobeh Abbasgholizadeh and Shadi Sadr, organised a demonstration in front of the court on the day of their hearing to register their objection to the arrests and the prosecution of women activists. They insisted that peaceful protest and the right to organise and demonstrate are granted to all citizens under the constitution. Even though there were not more than 60 or 70 demonstrators, the security forces arrested thirty-five women. The collective arrest of the women's movement became an international headline. In an attempt to sabotage the demonstration, the women were held for several days, and some were detained for weeks, before they were charged and released on bail. Ironically, the Iranian government's action brought much more national attention than the demonstration would have got otherwise and it also made international headlines. While TV and radio in Iran are controlled by the State, international attention was considerable and included programmes on Aljazeera, BBC and CNN.

Many women went in a defiant move in front of the Majlis to demonstrate as planned, while others organised meetings in large and small venues and hundreds of other women's gatherings were organised in private homes with placards and posters, the pictures of which were then posted on various websites and blogs. The celebrations were especially charged and emotional, given that several leaders remained in prison. Many women renewed their vow to fight for the legal equality of women, regardless of the cost. According to one international observer, the 2007 international Women's Day had become worldwide Iranian Women's Day.

Excerpted from:

Homa Hoodfar, Fatemeh Sadeghi, 2008. 'Against all Odds: The Building of a Women's Movement in the Islamic Republic of Iran (1979-2007)'. Unpublished WEMC research paper.

Pakistan

Negotiating cultural constructions of power in Balochistan

In focus group discussions in the remote border town of Usta Mohammed, Balochistan, known for increased instances of young women being murdered in the name of a man's honour, women talk to the research team about their understanding of power and powerlessness.

Married women participants in the focus group discussions articulated seemingly paradoxical perspectives on the exercise and impact of power within a marriage. On the one hand, women referred to husbands as the source of their *ikhtiar* (power/authority/control) while on the other men were identified as sources of *be-ikhtiari* (powerlessness). For instance, they said: 'power/authority/control comes from men' and 'he is the eldest so he has power/authority/control, and since she is his wife, she gets her power/authority/control from him'. These examples show how power reveals itself

through assertions of control and authority, backed by sources of legitimacy, such as social conventions, traditions, or religious exhortations. The eldest son is seen as the natural holder of power/authority because society and custom (both of which are perceived as not only un-contestable but also as naturalised) afford him that position. Since power is cast as a masculine attribute, a woman can gain it only indirectly through her relationship with the men in her life.

Excerpted from:

Khadija Zaheer, 2008. 'Shifting Margins: Women, Gender, and the Role of Power in Development'. Unpublished WEMC research paper.

The Shirkat Gah-WEMC team with respondents in Vehari, Pakistan
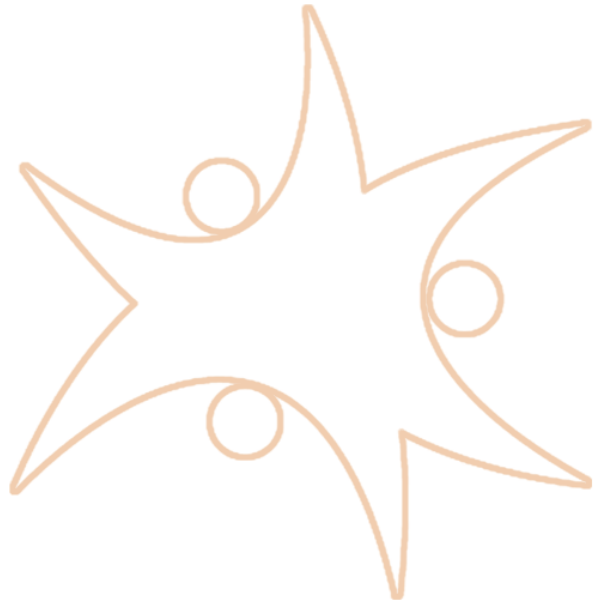
Conclusion

The path ahead

The WEMC research framework is an evolving map, guiding our collective journey to chart alternative narratives of women's empowerment. In a terrain that is only partially explored, it is necessarily a map in the making, requiring constant re-adjustments to incorporate new learning and insights about old and new solutions to intractable problems. Although we have developed the framework sufficiently to share it in the form of this public document, this publication is but one milestone in a much longer journey of continuous research and learning. At some future date, we intend to produce another edition of this framework as another milestone in our learning, expanded and re-oriented by new findings, lessons and reflections.

The WEMC research process is designed to evolve, in much the same way as women's empowerment progresses, from idea and aspiration to cycles of action-reflection-action. The process enables us to develop our learning in partnership with the diverse range of women with whom we work, including academics, activists, women at the grassroots, individual community women, loosely grouped women, leaders and members of social movements, as well as those working in the international agenda-setting arena. Our hope is that whatever we learn together from reflective documentation and joint analyses of women's experiences in challenging disempowering forces in their lives, will, in the long term, inspire and support the ongoing empowerment of women as a collectivity. Collaborative, facilitated learning with women in their communities and with groups and networks in civil society is one part of the equation. The other is engagement with key decision-makers in context-specific meso-level forums and wider macro-level arenas. Only thus can we catalyse a paradigmatic shift in understanding how women's empowerment can be achieved in Muslim contexts and beyond.

Mindful of the limited duration of the project, the WEMC Consortium has prioritised as its purpose the need to catalyse a sustainable and growing critical mass in civil society that, underpinned by transformative knowledge and support networks, will continue to work for long-term structural changes. The power structures that women face in their everyday lives have long existed before the policies, programmes and projects that are supposed to empower them. These power structures are likely to remain long after governments change, and programmes and projects end. It is therefore a priority for WEMC that in the short time we have, the lessons learnt about women's empowerment are firmly rooted in

Women Empowering Themselves: A framework that interrogates and transforms

local communities and indigenised among the women themselves, so that, eventually as empowered citizens, they can claim their full rights and entitlements in responsive state structures.

Within the life-span of this project, we can only support, facilitate or inspire those seeking to make a difference to the collective empowerment of women in local, national or cross-border contexts. Our hope is that, like yeast that makes bread or wine, our small but significant contribution can inform decisions and actions that impact on the structural conditions that shape women's lived realities. The new knowledge and understanding developed through grounded research with women is intended to inform the way that policy makers and development practitioners approach the complex, wide-ranging issues entailed in women's empowerment.

Eventually, transformation is dependent on women themselves questioning, challenging and re-shaping unfavourable gendered power relations in varied contexts. Such a transformation is not simple, not unilinear, and not a technical exercise that can be effected in the short run or through a top-down fiat. But difficult, complex, multi-dimensional, long-term and locally grounded processes of structural transformation must take place if women are to become empowered subjects of their own lives. Our aim is to make an enduring contribution to these necessary transformations – necessary, indeed, for all of us – through this ongoing work of mapping, documenting, analysing, and mutual learning.

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Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts (WEMC) first came together as a Research Programme Consortium (RPC) in 2005 through the partnership of universities, research institutions and non-governmental organizations in several countries.

The WEMC programme of research, capacity building and communication was launched in July 2006 with the following partners:

1. *Southeast Asia Research Centre (SEARC), City University of Hong Kong*
2. *Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre (SG), Pakistan*
3. *International Gender Studies Centre (IGS), Oxford University*
4. *Department of Community Health Sciences, Aga Khan University, Pakistan*
5. *Centre for Environment, Gender and Development, (ENGENDER), Hong Kong*
6. *Semarak Cerlang Nusa (SCN), Indonesia*
7. *Solidaritas Perempuan (SP) Indonesia*
8. *Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML) / Concordia University, Canada*

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