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Group versus individual relational capabilities: why it matters for gender

Cristina Santos

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No man is an island

- Literature on relational anthropology proposes:
 - development boils down to kinship and the quality of relationships people have
 - social connectedness and social capital are seen as public goods
- (Rupert Read, a political philosopher, in an attempt to argue for a move beyond freedom towards embeddedness, argued loneliness as one of the biggest problems in the Global North, and yet, wrongly excluded from welfare economics)

No man is an island

- Social movement theory and collective action:
 - aim to encourage individuals, either on their own or organised in groups, to either promote or resist social change through a *change in behaviour*
 - The group endorses and empowers the individual, it promotes individual and collective agency
 - When individuals organise themselves in groups, that changes power relations between groups with competing interests, which gives the group better outcomes than members would have obtained if acting on their own (sum is larger than the parts, and this rebalance starts a cycle of social change which benefits the individuals within the group who feel represented by the group)

No man is an island

- Collective capabilities
 - Social interactions produce capabilities which would not be created from the juxtaposition of individual capabilities (Ibrahim, 2008)
 - Collective capabilities are often defined at the individual level and reflect the enhancement of individual capabilities to group membership; stems from a criticism of the normative individualism of the capabilities approach, and argues that individualism limits freedom, because people can achieve more acting as part of a community than they can by acting alone.
 - Sen called these socially dependent capabilities
 - Dubois and his group called them relational capabilities
 - Foster and Hardy called them external capabilities
 - Volkert (2013) called them collective abilities

No man is an island

- Other ways in which the capabilities approach has recognised the importance of others in influencing individual capabilities, but without problematising individual capabilities in groups.
- Nussbaum's list includes affiliation as a basic capability (2011)

What is missing?

- Capabilities at the individual level which enable the individual “to form and sustain meaningful relationships, and to avoid harmful ones” (Santos, 2017)

Related concepts

- Robeyns mentions social conversion factors which include power relations (2005)
- Bundschuh (2019) proposes a notion of embodied connectivity where participatory / resonant-relational capabilities are broadly seen as an instrument to achieve other capabilities such as political participation or affiliation.
 - Bundschuh (2019) draws on neuroscience and the three tiered model of emotional development to argue that these relational capabilities are developed very early in life and remain static in adults
 - As Robeyns therefore, these authors conceptualise relational capabilities in a way which is to be taken as given and (at best) a capability to develop others, not a capability in its own right.
- Giddens' agency – structure model also recognises others in the structure which affects individual agency - freedom and ability to be and do what is of value
- Notion of empowerment, or the notion of power relations to increase individual and collective empowerment (concepts often related to women and girls)

Empowerment

“When individuals and organised groups are able to imagine their world differently and realise that vision by changing the relations of power that have kept them in poverty, restricted their voice and deprived them of their autonomy.” Eyben, R (2011) Supporting Pathways of Women’s Empowerment: a brief guide for international development organisations. Available at: www.ids.ac.uk/publication/supporting-pathways-of-women-s-empowerment-a-briefguide-for-international-development-organisations

“A process whereby people (a) become aware of the power dynamics at work in their life context b) develop the skills, sense of confidence and capacity for gaining some reasonable control over their lives c) exercise this control without infringing upon the rights of others and d) support the empowerment of others in the community.” Rowlands, J. (1995) ‘Empowerment Examined’ in Development in Practice, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 101-107. Taylor & Francis, Ltd

“A process of change during which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability.” Kabeer, Naila (2005) ‘Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment: A critical Analysis of the third Millennium Development Goal’, Gender and Development Vol. 13, Number 1, p.13.

Dimensions of empowerment

- Agency: the capacity to make decisions about one's own life and act on them to achieve a desired outcome, free of violence, retribution or fear;
- Relational: the power relations through which individuals negotiate their individual and collective empowerment;
- Structure: the environment that surrounds and conditions individual choices.

Embeddedness of individual's empowerment

Empowerment's definition recognises the embeddedness of the individual in a system where her power has to be negotiated with others, and depends on the power of others. A standard socio-ecological model summarises this, and allows us to think about the different realms of power which are intrinsically related to the individual's; What is important to emphasise from this model is that what happens at each level is as important as what happens between levels in constant reciprocal feedback loops. So can there be individual empowerment without a household or family empowerment? Women and girls as active agents of change, but should [or can] they be the only agents of change?



1. Summary Diagram: A theory of change on gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment ¹

IMPACT: Women and girls realise their full human rights and women and men, girls and boys live in full gender equality.

OUTCOMES

More equitable and non-discriminatory structures Governments (national and local), health systems, education, security and justice sectors and private corporations promote women's full and equal participation. Global development frameworks and institutions embed gender equality in policies and practices.

More balanced gender power relations Women and men are equal in decision-making at all levels, from household to global, across economic, political and social spheres, and the results of this are seen in improved outcomes for women and girls.

Women's increased agency and autonomy Women live free from violence and discrimination, control if and when to have children, have access to and control over economic resources and a full and equal say in the decisions that affect their lives.

OUTPUTS

Preventing and ending gender inequality is an explicit aim of government; effective policies and budgets are in place to deliver and are monitored; stronger accountability mechanisms are in place.

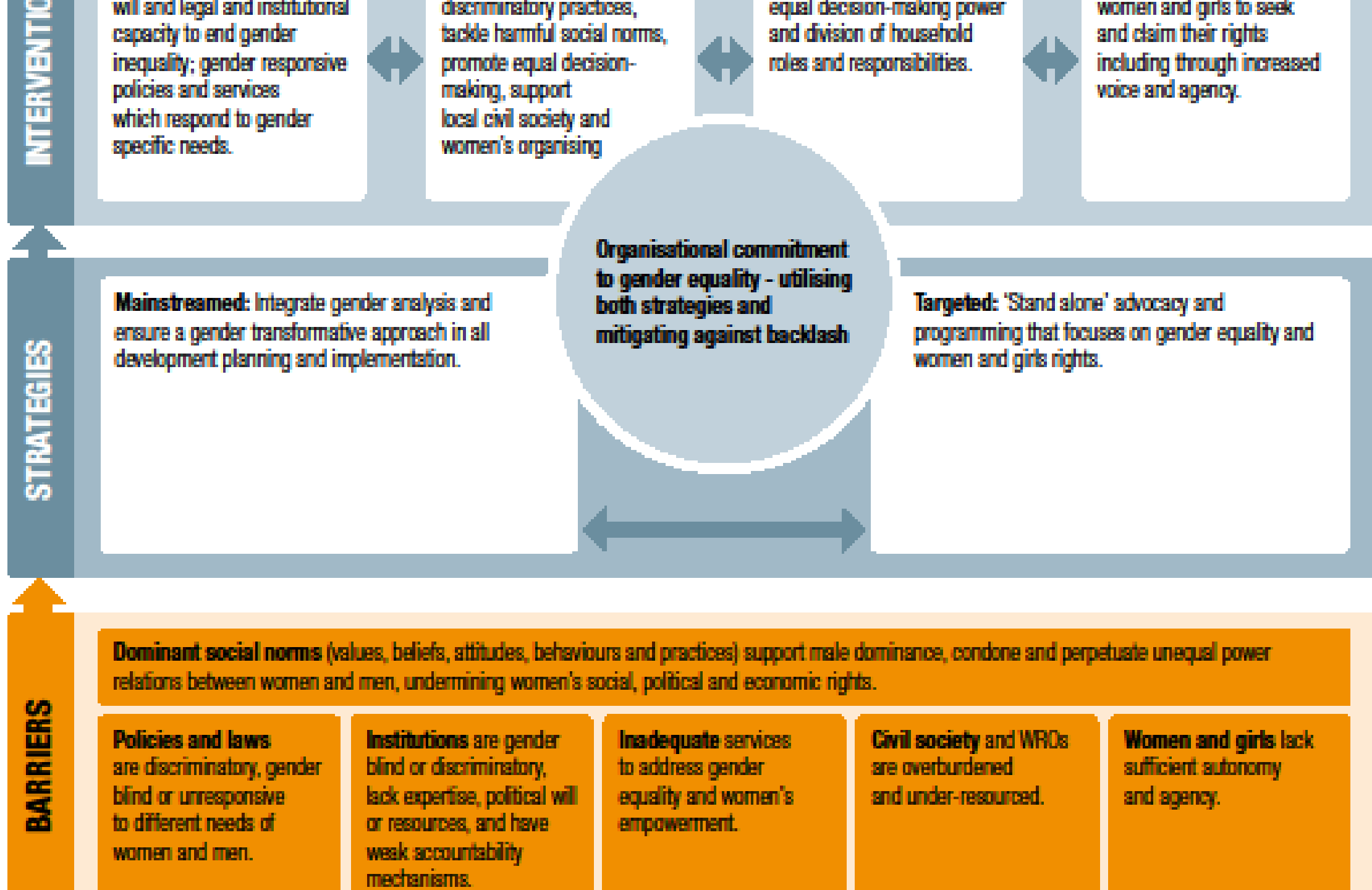
Legal systems, including customary and religious laws, recognise & respond to GEWE.

Women, women's rights defenders and WROs have the capacity to organise, facilitate change and respond to backlash.

Community level social norms promote and protect the concept and practice of gender equality.

Women and girls are supported by their relatives to access and exercise their rights.

Women and girls have the skills, knowledge and confidence to seek and claim their rights, both individually and collectively.



Empowerment in practice

- When applying a ToC model, even if not as linear and simplistic as most, the question of how to increase agency is always: how?
- Evidence from multiple empowerment programmes suggests the link between empowerment / increased agency and the programme is often disappointing, if not adverse:
 - <https://degrp.odi.org/why-merely-owning-land-isnt-enough-to-empower-africas-women-farmers/>
 - Evidence suggests drop outs from CCT programmes are often households where conflict and violence arose as a result of the programme
 - Some evidence feminist employment policies, or gender equality interventions, can lead to conflict and cognitive dissonance of “beneficiaries”

Role of individual relational capabilities

- We empower women through the development of their relational capabilities. We have a mechanism, via which we see how agency can be improved which is not instrumental or driven by the third person's agenda
- Group membership is not always an unconstrained choice and individuals are not necessarily better off in groups than they would be outside the group – eg abusive relationships, facebook and social media.