

Empowerment as a panacea for poverty – old wine in new bottles? Reflections on the World Bank's conception of power

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Abstract: The World Bank has been accused of 'power blindness' for three reasons: its neglect of political power; its disregard for the power dynamic in inter-personal relationships; and its undemocratic corporate culture. However, power blindness, as commonly defined, does not offer a satisfactory picture of the Bank's actual conception of power used in the poverty agenda. Using a feminist framework of power, I demonstrate an evolving and transforming concept of power in the Bank's poverty alleviation policies over the past two decades. Four concepts of power are outlined: power-to; power-with; power-over; and power-from-within. The Bank's stress on economic power and the calculated adoption of two 'positive' powers – 'power-to' and 'power-with' – are seen as being the key features in combating poverty. Power, in the Bank's perspective, is instrumental in nature and is a means to achieve economic efficiency. This overly limited vision of power is not without its problems. The new idea of empowerment, propounded as a solution to poverty in the *World Development Report 2000/2001*, actually follows the Bank's conventional principle of power, and fails to offer any new developmental thinking. This paper examines critiques of the Bank's analysis of power regarding the dark sides of 'power-to' and 'power-with', and the possibilities of including 'power-over' and 'power-from-within' in the debate. In the last section, it questions the feminist idea of power, given the diverse nature of women, the desirability of the inclusion of men and the significance of socially embedded power.

Key words: empowerment, social capital, World Bank.

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I Introduction

The significance of empowerment in the poverty agenda finally received official recognition by the World Bank in the *World Development Report 2000/2001* (World Bank, 2001). Power, as the root-concept of empowerment, is now regarded as a key to understanding the complex process of poverty. This emphasis on the positive role of empowerment seems to have marked the Bank's first and direct response to the long-standing accusation of 'power blindness' in most poverty alleviation projects (Shepherd, 2001). However, this 'sudden' transformation has raised both questions and suspicions: does the inclusion of empowerment represent a revolutionary development in thinking, in which the Bank determines to bring 'power' into account, or is it merely 'old wine in a new bottle', which reinforces the same overriding World Bank development principle of economic efficiency?

This paper is divided into four parts. First, I will examine the general accusation of 'power blindness' against the Bank, and examine a wider understanding of the Bank's conception of power. Then, using the feminist framework of power, I will argue that the Bank has carefully selected two 'positive' powers – 'power-to' and 'power-with' – in poverty alleviation policies over the past two decades. In the third section, I will explore the potential limitations and inadequacies of the Bank's notion of power. In the final section, I will take the opportunity to evaluate the gaps in the feminist notion of power.

II Questioning 'power blindness'

The increasing numbers of the poor, and growing local, national and international inequalities, indicate that international development agencies are failing to meet the targets of combating poverty in many countries (Hubbard, 2001). Amis (2001) points out that urban poverty as a proportion of total poverty in some developing countries has rapidly worsened. In the light of this failure, the World Bank, as the most influential international development agency, has been criticized for not taking power into account. According to Townsend *et al.* (1999: 24), 'World poverty will not be reduced unless power and self-empowerment are [at] the head of the agenda'.

In the development literature, there are at least three different, though not mutually exclusive, accusations of power blindness against the Bank. They concern: (1) the political-economic dichotomy; (2) the micro-macro economic division; (3) the undemocratic institutional culture in the Bank. The first accusation has been made for some time in development journals. The argument is that the Bank has portrayed the state as an apolitical, interest-free and technocratic body whose role is solely to implement policy. This assumption has caused the Bank to neglect the country-specific political structures and influences. As a result, corruption prevails, elites pursue their own interests at the expense of the poor, the abuse of corporative power is widespread (Hildyard and Wilks, 1998), and governments have been able to use World Bank projects to reinforce their bureaucratic state power over the powerless. Furthermore, Nafziger (1993: 148) suggests that the Bank's lending policies may even influence the 'shifts of power within sub-Saharan countries'.

The second accusation is mainly levelled by development feminists. They argue that the Bank's preoccupation with macro-economic restructuring in developing countries

has led to the power dynamics at intra-household level being ignored, so that women cannot access power and resources. As O'Brien *et al.* (2000: 47) comment, 'Neo-liberal economics pitches its analyses at the level of the macro economy, whereas feminist economics begins in the micro-economics and *politics* of decision making between women and men in the household' (emphasis added).

The third aspect is concerned with the World Bank's blind spot regarding its own undemocratic corporate culture. The asymmetric power relationship between the Bank and the recipient countries, the male- and white-dominated senior staff and the lack of transparency and accountability, have reinforced the existing inequality and affected the Bank's sensitivity to external critique (Chant and Gutmann, 2000). As Mosley (2001: 308) argues, the Bank's approach is 'excessively top-down and more guided by the internal voices of the Bank than the voices of the poor'. Externally, Brock-Utne (2000: 64) strongly protests that the Bank has the 'power to define concepts and to enforce its policies by rewarding those countries showing willingness to follow the recommendations and punishing – or at least not funding – the others'. Therefore, ironically but justifiably, Chambers (2001: 305) believes that the World Bank is the 'victim of its power'.

Without a doubt, these three accusations have provided extra dimensions to power analysis, and have demonstrated how power insensitive the World Bank has been in its long involvement in development projects. They also help to shift our attention away from the existing restricted discussion on the economic impact of projects to the 'politics of lending', the term specifically used in Nafziger's study (1993: 148), from macro restructuring to gender sensitivity and power dynamics at the household level (Murphy, 1997), and from intrinsic inequality between the Bank and the recipient countries to a possible partnership in future (Daly, 1999). The critics' analysis of power touches on a wide range of issues, including poverty, education, environment, and gender.

However, the 'power-blind' critique and discourse is not without its problems. First, what does 'power blindness' actually mean? Jeremy Leaman (2001: 193) uses the term 'blindness of power' as the title of a chapter in his book. It is undeniably very eye-catching, but the concept was neither clearly defined, clarified, nor elaborated on in his book. A similar problem may also be found, for instance, in Martin and Simmons's (2001) and Barnett and Finnemore's (2001) works. More discussion about theorizing power, therefore, is needed when various schools of thought may have their own interpretations of the nature of power (Haralambos and Heald, 2002). Furthermore, the term 'blindness' is also problematic. When the Bank is accused of being blind to power, does it mean that the Bank is unaware of power, as hinted at by Storey (2000), or does it mean that the Bank deliberately puts power aside (Nafziger, 1993)? Bourdieu (1996) suggests that power may exhibit many forms and change over time; the term 'blindness' may be too vague and too static for making a substantial analysis.

Secondly, the three accusations tend to propose a dialectic division of concepts, such as the 'economic versus political arena', 'paid versus domestic work' and the 'Bank versus recipient country' respectively. These separations may be neither desirable nor possible. To use Himmelweit's (2000) research on work and the household as an example, she sheds light on the fact that the boundary between paid and unpaid work has become less clear as their interactions become more frequent, and unpaid work may

not necessarily be confined to the home nowadays. Therefore, these divisions may only hinder our understanding of the cross-boundary nature of power (Clegg, 1989).

As we have seen, the ‘power blindness’ accusation is not a satisfactory explanation alone when examining the limitations of the Bank’s analysis of power. In the next section, we explore whether the feminist framework of power can provide an alternative.

III Feminist framework of power

There are different schools of thought within feminist discourse, ranging from the moderate to radical thinking, and with diverse ontological and epistemological standpoints (Olsen, 1999). An understanding of the feminist analysis of power may be derived from the works of Rowlands (1997), Townsend *et al.* (1999) and Allen (1999). Although there are some differences between them, in particular regarding the significance of the role of ‘power-from-within’ and the desirability of a male-inclusive approach, the key feature in feminist theorizing about power is the emphasis on power as a relational concept. Feminists stress the multi-dimensional nature of power at different levels: personal, group, regional, national and international levels. This feminist framework suggests four perspectives of power: ‘power-from-within’, ‘power-to’, ‘power-with’ and ‘power-over’ (see Figure 1).

‘Power-from-within’ is also known as personal power. It examines the psychological power in the minds of people and focuses on the sense of self – self-confidence, self-esteem and self-respect. As Shields (1995: 23) remarks: ‘These components [of an internal sense of self] include claiming pieces of their identity, the development of self-

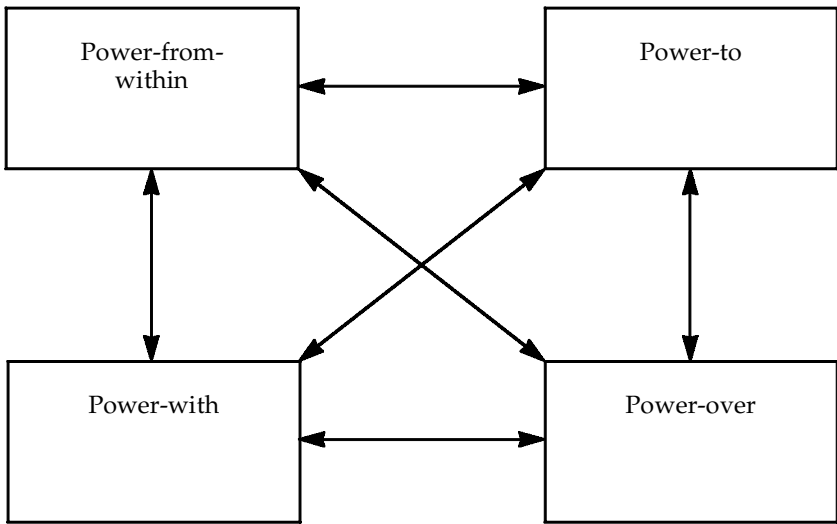


Figure 1 The feminist multi-dimensional and dynamic analysis of power
Source: Developed from Rowlands (1997), Townsend *et al.* (1999) and Allen (2000).

value, the development of self-acceptance, and the development of trust in terms of self-knowledge'. Its main objective is to develop a sense of ability to overcome internalized oppression.

'Power-to' refers to the capacity to take action. It highlights the generative and productive capacity of an individual. There are three interrelated objectives: as a means of liberation (Townsend *et al.*, 1999: 34); as a means of participation (Allen, 1999: 127); and as a means to mobilize for change (Kabeer, 1994).

'Power-with' emphasizes the collective forces, where people cooperate with each other to solve problems and attain goals. It is mainly concerned with a sense of solidarity, capacity building, social networks and organizational strength. It is intended to demonstrate the idea of 'I cannot, but *we* can'.

'Power-over' is resisting force. It is negative because it forces someone or some groups to do things against their will. However, it can also be positive because it overrules dominance and unequal structures of power (Rowlands, 1997: 13)

This framework of power is, to a great extent, a product of the constant comparison and discussion of power by Michel Foucault (in Rabinow, 1990), Anthony Giddens (1984) and Derek Layder (1997) over the past three decades. In parallel with Foucault's idea of power, for example, this framework argues that power is not necessarily negative, destructive or repressive. It may be productive and generative. Power may be both covert and overt, visible and hidden at the same time; therefore, we may not consciously recognize its existence, but we produce and reproduce power through discourses. The control of power may not necessarily be governed by physical, economic and social strength, but by socialization and social practices.

While Giddens agrees with Foucault that power may be dispersed, fragmented and plural in nature, he criticizes Foucault's analysis for being too deterministic, assuming the complete passivity of human beings. He stresses the autonomy and 'transformative capacity' of human agency which make resistance and solidarity possible (Allen, 1999).

Layder's (1997: 161) main contribution is his view of the 'multi-centred view of power'. His critique of Foucault essentially concerns the neglect of a psychological dimension and of interpersonal power dynamics in everyday life. He argues that power is a ubiquitous and ever-present feature of social reality, and the form and nature of power vary and evolve in different social settings. This highlights the dynamic, fluid and unpredictable nature of power within and across boundaries.

Before we move on to the next section, there are two things we need to bear in mind. First, the four perspectives of power should not be viewed as separate entities but as a web of change. Different types of power are not mutually exclusive and they may coexist in a particular location at a specific period of time. Secondly, this conception of power is not necessarily confined to feminist or gender analysis. Power can and should expand to include different kinds of social relations, so that race, class, ethnicity, age and life-cycle stages may be analysed in parallel with gender.

IV Poverty, power and World Bank

The unprecedented inclusion of empowerment as one of the three key themes in the *World Development Report 2000/2001*, has brought a degree of surprise and excitement to some development advocates. It deserves our attention because it demonstrates the

Bank's courage in responding to the long-standing accusation of power blindness. Shepherd (2001: 316) suggests that the Report reveals the Bank's 'recognition of the importance of politics through the notion of empowerment'. In addition, the positive role that empowerment can play in poverty alleviation has been given a modest level of attention, for empowerment is a 'completely new add-on to the approach of the 1990 [World Development] report' (Mosley, 2001: 308).

Nonetheless, as Rowlands (1997) remarks, if we want to know more about empowerment we need to examine its root-concept: power. I will argue that if we want to understand the Bank's conception of power, we cannot refer only to the *World Development Report 2000/2001*. We also need to analyse the role of power in the Bank's previous poverty reduction policies. In the following analysis, I will roughly divide the Bank's progression in its concept of power into three parts: (1) neoliberalism (from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s), (2) the post-Washington consensus (from the mid-1990s to the late 1990s), and (3) the *World Development Report* (2001). This progression is summarized in Table 1.

1 Neoliberalism

Since the 1980s, the influence of neoliberal economic orthodoxy has dominated the Bank's anti-poverty strategies. The free market has been keenly advocated whilst the influence of the state has been dramatically undermined. The poor were assumed to be 'missed' economic potential whose productivity could be tapped for economic growth on the one hand, and whose opportunity cost of economic participation was very low (O'Brien *et al.*, 2000). Based on the presupposition of economic rationality, the poor can respond to market signals or economic incentives, regardless of their class, race, gender or other social constraints.

Owing to the success of some East Asian economies and the response to 'adjustment with a human face', the Bank was convinced that increasing the provision of education and health services, as the key human capital investment, played a very positive role in increasing economic productivity. This instrumental view of participation was further justified in the *World Development Report 1990*, with its emphasis on intensive growth and human capital development.

The Bank is not totally power-blind. It has deliberately selected a very 'positive' economic power – power-to – to achieve its goal of poverty alleviation. As Batliwala (1993: 24) argues, the Bank assumes that the poor's powerlessness comes from their weak economic position, therefore power comes automatically through economic strength and 'empowerment through economic intervention and inclusion' is seen to be the best solution to poverty.

In other words, 'power-to', is the key development thinking, it is the means by which the Bank can allow the poor access to the market economy and thereby strengthen overall economic efficiency. This highly instrumental and individualized nature of power, in the Bank's mind, is compatible with the Bank's top-down approach – power can be 'given' by the outsiders, and delivered by projects. However, this blind belief in 'positive economic power' is not without its problems. These will be examined in detail in the next section.

Table 1 The transformation of the World Bank's conception of power in its poverty alleviation policies over two decades

Period	Economic influence	Rationale(s)	Key document(s)	Perspective(s) of power
1980s–mid-1990s	Neoliberalism	• Free market advocated; • The poor regarded as potential economic assets; • Expanding human capital investment; • Encouragement of women's participation in labour markets • Expanding micro-credit schemes	<i>World Development Report 1982</i> (World Bank, 1982) <i>World Development Report 1990</i> (World Bank, 1990)	Power-to (participating in economic activities; individual economic power)
Mid-1990s–late-1990s	Post-Washington consensus and institutional economics	• Re-positioning the role of the state; • Partnership with civil societies; • Group participation; • Community involvement; • The role of social capital	<i>World Development Report 1997</i> (World Bank, 1997); Grootaert's (1998) research on social capital	Power-to (individual economic power) and power-with (collective power)
2000–2001	Post-Washington consensus and institutional economics	• Empowerment as one key development theme; • Political power to influence government decision making; • Good governance; • Remove social and cultural constraints; • Complexity of gender, race, class and ethnicity	<i>World Development Report 2001</i> (World Bank, 2001)	Power-to (individual economic power) and power-with (collective power) and empowerment as political power (but its real influence is in question)

Sources: World Bank (1982, 1990, 1997, 2001); Grootaert (1998); Moser (1999); Fine (2001).

2 Post-Washington consensus

Since the mid-1990s there has been a marked change in development thinking in the Bank. Whether it should be called the 'post-Washington consensus', as suggested by Fine (2001), or 'the New Aid Agenda' by Townsend *et al.* (1999), the discussion is rather similar. The increasing influence of institutional economics inside the Bank has led to a re-examination of the role of the state, civil societies and community participation. The sole reliance on individual-oriented 'power-to' finally seemed inadequate as a means to drag the poor out of poverty.

Social capital, defined as 'features of social organizations such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit' (Putnam, 1993: 67), is regarded as 'the missing link' in development (Grootaert, 1998). Narayan's (1997) study in Tanzania suggests that a 1% increase in social capital can result in a 20% income rise. As a consequence, the poor are encouraged to join groups, to form networks and build trust within the community. The underlying assumption is that poverty can be alleviated by shifting resources from richer group members or neighbours to the poorer.

As Townsend *et al.* (1999: 46) observe: '... groups have become a leading official 'solution' to social and economic problems'. The Bank regards this collective-natured 'power-with' as being as important as 'power-to' in poverty reduction, and this new social power is also intended to bring about higher economic productivity.

3 World Development Report 2000/2001

From the perspective of power analysis, the inclusion of empowerment has made this Report different from that of the previous era. Empowerment means 'enhancing the capacity of poor people to influence the state institutions that affect their lives, by strengthening their participation in political processes and local decision-making' (World Bank, 2001: 39) and poverty is 'evident in poor people's lack of political power' (World Bank, 2001: preface). Political power, along with economic power, is underlined in the Report which seems to be the Bank's attempt to respond to the long-lasting accusation of political blindness. In addition, the Report also highlights the Bank's determination to remove cultural and social constraints, and focuses on the diverse reality of gender, race and class (p. 117).

Despite all of these positive aspects in the Bank's increasingly sophisticated appreciation of power, we need to ask: what are the implications of confining 'empowerment' to a political dimension? Has it done so because the Bank realizes that it needs to redress the problem of political blindness or is it a means to distract our attention from a detailed examination of the problems associated with the dominance of economic power? We urge caution because, from previous experience of the Bank's involvement in participatory development, giving political power to the poor turned out to be lip service only (Oakley, 1991). Political participation can encompass consultation without giving decision-making power to the participants. The function of empowerment is to improve market efficiency, as clearly stated in the Report:

[empowerment] means removing the barriers – political, legal, and social – that work against particular groups and building the assets of poor people to enable them to engage effectively in markets (World Bank, 2001: 39).

Hence, the Bank has aroused suspicion that empowerment may simply further reinforce the values of neoliberal orthodoxy in development thinking.

Moser (1999: 16) suggests that the inclusion of political power is the Bank's effort to 'combine efficiency and equality' for the purpose of sustainable development. However, the question of whether these two rationales are compatible remains unanswered. If equality becomes an obstacle to efficiency, will the Bank sacrifice the former for the sake of the latter? Furthermore, the Bank's conception of empowerment remains elusive. There is a widespread tendency to 'mix' or 'confuse' approaches, in which empowerment is used interchangeably with democratization and decentralization (Mosley, 2001), political participation (Moore, 2001) and economic involvement (Cleaver, 1999). For example, Moore (2001) highlights that, from the Bank's point of view, empowerment among the poor depends on whether the poor are politically organized and the extent to which local organizations are successfully linked to higher hierarchies.

Cleaver (1999) counters that these concepts are not synonymous. The linkages between them are not clearly defined, and the impacts of one on the others are not well explained. For instance, following from her previous works on the collective management of water resources in Tanzania and Zimbabwe, she argues that poor women paying for water services should not be considered as being thereby empowered as consumers, and the inclusion of women on water associations may not necessarily represent 'a form of female emancipation' (p. 598). Therefore, the indiscriminate use of these terms has created more confusion than clarification.

To summarize, the Bank's conception of power is not static. The shift from the sole emphasis on 'power-to' to the inclusion of 'power-with' witnesses a learning process, although these two powers, within the Bank's own perceptions, remain economically oriented (Fine, 2001). This careful selection of two 'positive' powers demonstrates that the Bank is not blind to power. From the Bank's point of view, empowerment is instrumental in nature and is a means to attain economic efficiency. Although we have observed that the Bank has recognized the significance of empowerment in its development thinking, the narrow view of empowerment it has employed unsatisfactorily confines power to the political sphere and has inevitably evaded the discussion of the potential problems of 'power-to' and 'power-with' in the Bank's anti-poverty agenda. Hence the potentials of empowerment are severely restricted by the Bank's overly limited vision of power.

V Critiques of the Bank's conception of power

It is undeniable that the Bank's idea of power still remains narrow and instrumental. Has this limited the effectiveness of its anti-poverty policies? What kinds of problems have been created? Can empowerment become disempowerment? Are there paradoxes of empowerment? This section will attempt to develop a critique of the Bank's overly limited analysis of power.

The feminist perspective of power calls for extra attention to be given to empowering claims which may affect women's lives. Empowerment is regarded as a multi-dimensional and complex process operating at the level of both the individual and of societal structures (Boulding, 1989). As psychological, economic, social and political

Table 2 A comparison of the World Bank and the feminist conception of empowerment

	World Bank	Feminist
Perspective	• Careful selection of the two ‘positive’ economic powers: ‘power-to’ and ‘power-with’	• The dynamic interaction between ‘power-from-within’, ‘power-to’, ‘power-with’ and ‘power-over’
Rationale	• Economic efficiency • Equality	• Overrule women’s internal and external oppression by men
Approach	• Project approach • Empowerment as a means to achieve economic goals	• Process approach • Empowerment as a means to achieve equality and an end in itself

Sources: World Bank (1990, 2001); Moser (1999); Allen (1999); Rowlands (1997); Townsend *et al.* (1999).

processes interact, empowering and disempowering consequences may occur simultaneously, pulling in different directions. These may affect different groups of women or the same women in their different life courses (Jackson and Pearson, 1998).

Empowerment refers both to ‘the indicators ... such as access to resources and achievement, and to the processes that shape empowerment’ (Wray, 2001: 4). In Kabeer’s words (1999), they stress the equal importance of fulfilling both practical and strategic needs, emphasize movements for change, challenge inequalities and transform social structures. However, the feminists also realize the difficulties of assessing and measuring empowerment. Table 2 illustrates the main differences between the Bank’s and the feminists’ idea of power.

There remains the suspicion that the Bank has over-romanticized the positive sides of ‘power-to’ and ‘power-with’, with the result that their dark sides are disregarded and, for the poor, the costs of economic involvement and group participation are not fully examined. The worrying consequence is that the poor may not necessarily be better off, as the Bank has presupposed.

This blind faith in ‘power-to’ is clearly reflected in most micro-credit programmes. The Bank intends to bring the poor, in particular poor women, into the market by assisting them to gain control of money and resources. However, as Townsend *et al.* (1999: 36) argue, this inclusion ‘relies upon gendered divisions of labour and power as well as systems of class and national inequalities’. There are also worries that economic participation may bring about conflicts and violence within households and groups. More importantly, the Bank’s micro-credit schemes are of an ‘individualized and home-based’ nature. They neglect the associated issues of social and relational changes, in which the prevailing power distribution and inequalities governing the pattern of income control and the decision making process are not addressed but reinforced (Kabeer, 1994).

The idea of group participation may foster a strong sense of community, it can, however, equally exclude and oppress the poor. As Portes (1998) points out: groups or

institutions can become a form of social control, in which participants are under tremendous social pressure to adapt their personalities, to make compromises and to avoid rejection from their parents, relatives, friends, neighbours and other group members. An increase in numbers and forms of associations is not always a change for the better because highly formalized, bureaucratic associations may only contribute to hierarchy, oppression and inequality. Rowlands (in Townsend *et al.*, 1999: 170) also highlights the fact that group involvement may fail to reach the target because group participants are 'by-definition-already-empowered' and the poor remain excluded.

The Bank's careful selection of powers raises the question of whether it is possible and desirable to emphasize some powers but neglect others. In the feminist analysis, power is a dynamic and multidimensional concept, in which different forms of power can happen simultaneously. The Bank has attempted to avoid 'power-over', because this kind of power is regarded as 'confrontational' in nature (Moser, 1999: 16) and involves 'cultural interference' in practice (O'Brien *et al.*, 2000: 51). Yet, the question remains: is 'power-over' avoidable? Can the Bank address one issue of power, but neglect other dimensions of power?

Allen (1999: 18) has stressed the fact that empowerment and domination are intertwined and exercising 'power-to' and 'power-with' can presuppose 'power-over'. Thus, Floro and Schaefer (1998) argue that the poor's participation in labour will definitely alter the existing labour-use pattern, employee-employer and employee-employee relationships. As a result, the change of power distribution happens not only within households but also in day-to-day social interactions of gender, race, class and ethnicity. How do the vested interest groups perceive the challenging power relations? These changes may contribute to new forms of 'power-over' which the Bank has not addressed.

Based on the assumption of economic rationality, the Bank presupposes that the poor can respond to market signals and economic incentives. However, it ignores the significance of 'power-from-within' or the psychological dimension of the poor. From Duncan and Edwards's (1999) research on single mothers in England, it emerges that, despite the attractiveness of a good salary and the availability of child care services, some lone mothers are reluctant to join the labour market because they are concerned with their neighbours' and friends' perceptions of what a 'good mother' means. Other studies have demonstrated that a sense of confidence and self-esteem is not necessarily relevant to what a person possesses socially, economically and politically. Thus non-economic, psychological factors are crucial to understanding the nature of power (Shields, 1995).

The Bank's concept of empowerment as an instrumental means to attain economic ends is strongly criticized by feminists. They claim that the Bank's belief in projects to promote empowerment has reflected its failure to understand the true meaning of empowerment. Zapata (in Batliwala, 1993: 150) stresses that: 'empowerment is a slow process, hard to measure or to establish evidence of change'. Therefore, a conventional project cycle becomes an obstacle to empowerment because the project imperative stresses 'meeting practical rather than strategic needs, instrumentality rather than empowerment' (Cleaver, 1999: 598). Thus, Chambers (2001) suggests that the World Bank, IMF and nongovernmental organizations need to keep a sense of self-critical reflection in implementing empowerment programmes. The success and sustainability of these programmes will largely depend on whether the poor are

encouraged to identify their own needs and priorities, and are 'able and entitled to make decisions'.

To summarize, the Bank's neoliberal concern with efficiency has strongly imposed a highly instrumental perspective on the poor's contribution to development, rather than the contribution of development to the poor's empowerment (O'Brien *et al.*, 2000). A blind faith in the positive sides of 'power-to' and 'power-with' has limited the scope of most empowerment-related programmes. The prevention of 'power-over' has restrained the Bank from adopting a more complete and drastic transformation of the existing unequal power relations. The assumption of economic rationality also undermines the psychological dimension of power acquisition. All in all, feminists argue that empowerment, viewed as a process rather than in project perspective, is not simply a means but also an end in itself.

VI Critiques of the feminist conception of power

The feminist conception of power is insightful, illustrating the dynamic, multidimensional nature of power and offering a critique of the Bank's narrow vision of power. However, feminist theorizing of power is not without its problems. Conceptually, is there any sequence for promoting empowerment, taking into account the four perspectives of power? Do the presuppositions of male dominance, female subordination and of the homogeneity of the poor limit the inclusion of men in poverty-related development? How can the incorporation of informal power change the feminist study of power? The following section addresses these three major questions.

It is easy to lose sight of what kind of power really makes sense to the poor in reality. Rowlands (in Townsend *et al.*, 1999: 172–73) warns that:

in examining power in their own lives, these women are not making such distinctions, not putting their lives into those boxes. Their lives are a whole, where different aspects overlap and interact . . . when you look at what is involved for empowerment of women, you have to look at the totality of their experience.

Thus, empowerment needs to be examined in a more holistic manner which emphasizes the interactions between social relations and individual experiences (Wray, 2000).

The issue of inter-subjectivity between researchers and the researched also needs to be addressed. Research is not a power-neutral exercise and the 'superior' position of the researchers may produce another form of subordination and oppression of the poor. Furthermore, it is highly debatable whether each perspective of power carries an equal level of significance and should be given equal emphasis in discussions of empowerment. It appears that there has been a shift of attention from power-over to power-from-within in some feminist studies (Shields, 1995). In the past, power-over was the main goal of empowerment. However, over the decade, power-from-within has gained momentum, now being regarded as the most crucial perspective. For example, Townsend *et al.* (1999: 24) point out that: 'True empowerment is self-empowerment'. What is the sequence of achieving empowerment and which perspective of power should come first, are major questions facing nongovernmental organizations when they carry out empowerment-related programmes.

While 'power-from-within' may be highly appreciated, its potential limitations are less well known. Some feminists believe that personal power is viewed as a weapon to tackle internal oppression which 'enables her to value herself, change herself, grow and have more autonomy' (Batliwala, 1993: 150). However, Layder's (1997) analysis shows that subjective power is not always as constructive as feminists presuppose. The notion of subjective power refers to 'variable capacities of specific individuals' (p. 176). When he examined individuals' psychological predisposition towards the exercise of power, he found that the desire for honour, prestige, motivation, ambition, the feeling of security and the sense of identity varies from individual to individual and changes in different social settings. For instance, in her research in Zimbabwe, Dikito-Wachtmeister (2000) discovered out that some members of the water committees who acquire leadership skills and possess charisma may, on the one hand hold more power and, on the other and even worse, diminish the power of the others. Layder (1997) argues, therefore, that: '[the feminists] do not adequately deal with the psychological dimension of human behaviour, particularly its emotional aspects and its relation to the analysis of activity and power' (p. 175).

Another limitation of the feminist analysis of power is the tendency to make generalizations which ignore 'the differences that difference makes' (Allen, 1999: 16). Generally speaking, the feminists make two different generalizations. The first is that the poor's subordination is a universal phenomenon. This presupposition mistakenly puts the poor and the powerlessness together. Since the poor must be powerless, empowerment is necessary for the poor if they are to change their situation. However, the causal relationship between empowerment and poverty is not yet clearly explored. Empowerment may result in poverty, which is opposite to what some feminists have advocated. Some poor may lack economic but not political power, but some may lack both. Power relations and conflicting interests simultaneously exist within and between the same categories and different categories. Therefore, Yuval-Davies (1994, in Rowlands, 1997: 25) warns us to be 'cautious of constructions which assume a specific identity politics which homogenizes and naturalizes social categories and groupings, denying shifting boundaries and internal power differences and conflicts of interests'.

The second assumption of male dominance and female subordination has confined the feminist concept of power to 'male power versus female power'. It disregards the wide range of social, political and cultural arrangements in non-western societies. Does this assumption imply that women should work together and mobilize 'power-from-within', 'power-to' and 'power-with' in order to achieve 'power-over' men? Women are not homogeneous in their needs and interests (Moser and Clark, 2001). The stereotypes of men and women as powerful versus powerless, selfish versus selfless, and of men as a problem versus women as a solution, should be challenged (Chant and Gutmann, 2000). Diverse and complex social and cultural conditions inside and outside women's groups need to be examined. Empowerment links not only with gender relations, but also with social, class, caste, race, ethnic and North-South relations (Cleaver, 2000). For example, Kandiyoti (1998) points out that these influence competing interests, rights, obligations and resources even between members of households.

The use of socially embedded power (also known as informal power) is neglected in feminist analysis. In an attempt to increase the poor's voice and visibility, feminists have demanded greater representation in formal institutions and organizations. However, is it what the poor really want? Are more formal and institutionalized groups

always a guarantee of empowerment? James Scott (1985) suggests that socially embedded power, such as gossip, can be regarded as a form of resistance against suppression, although its degree of power is questioned. Townsend *et al.*'s (1999) study discovered that institutional structures tend to centralize power, to control participation and to prefer a standard mould. Therefore, women's participation in formal power may only be disadvantaged, because women may find it difficult to compete with men who have already developed very strong informal links with officials in the community. Instead, some poor may favour less visible and formalized associations with 'loose networks, flat hierarchies, diffused authority and responsibility' in order to gain autonomy and flexible administration (O'Brien *et al.*, 2000: 58). Furthermore, some informal management may allow the poor to obtain resources and even break the rules without facing criticism and punishment (Cleaver, 1997).

Last but not least, focusing on women and empowerment overlooks the importance of the gender relationship and the positions, values and beliefs of men. The nature of men's power over women may be different at different times, in different places and for different reasons. Not all men wield the same kind of power over women and not all men are capable of exercising power over women. When men are also 'gendered beings' and they are also tied up by masculinities, the process of empowerment can also liberate men (Morran and Wilson, 1999). To incorporate men into gender development can, Chant and Gutmann (2000) believe, make gender and development more effective and sustainable. Of course, the main tension is about resource availability and distribution, and the risk of male dominance in the gender-mixed groups. Therefore, further research on the impact of the male-inclusive approach on gender equality is needed (Bujra and Baylies, 2000).

VII Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to demonstrate that 'power blindness' is not a satisfactory characterization of the World Bank's concept of power. Using the feminist framework of power, it is possible to show that underlying the Bank's anti-poverty programmes has been an evolving and transforming concept of power. The change from the sole reliance on 'power-to' in the 1980s to the integration of 'power-with' in the 1990s supports the argument that the Bank has carefully and intentionally selected these two 'positive' powers. The Bank regards empowerment as a means to achieve the goal of economic efficiency. However, this narrow vision of power and the neglect of multidimensional forms of power have restricted the effectiveness of the Bank's poverty reduction policies. This has resulted in over-romanticizing the positive side of 'power-to' and 'power-over', ignoring their downside and the cost to the poor of participation. The avoidance of 'power-over' and the use of a 'project' approach in promoting empowerment have also been criticised by feminists for reinforcing existing inequalities, rather than transforming them. I have also highlighted some limitations of the feminist theorizing of power. The present framework has failed to show how these four perspectives of power interact with each other. The assumptions of the homogeneity of the poor, of men, and of women, need to be addressed. Finally, the use of socially embedded power among the poor, in particular women, will need further examination.

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