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Jinn Winn Chong

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THE POLITICS OF THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN:
MAPPING ENABLING ENVIRONMENTS WITHIN
NARRATIVES OF FEMININITY AND POWER

JINN WINN CHONG*

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* Masters of Laws (LL.M.) and Masters in International Service (MIS), American University Washington College of Law. The author currently serves as Program Design and Development Specialist at Catalyst-IpF Accessibility, Cross-Cultural, and Conflict Competency Consulting, Washington, D.C.

Gender equality must become a lived reality.

—Michelle Bachelet, UN Women Executive Director

INTRODUCTION: UN WOMEN—A HISTORIC MILESTONE IN THE
GLOBAL WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AGENDA

July 2010 marked another milestone in the long history of the international women's agenda when the United Nations General Assembly voted unanimously to create UN Women,¹ the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women, "to assist countries and the United Nations system itself to progress more effectively and efficiently toward the goal of achieving gender equality, women's empowerment and upholding women's rights."² This watershed effort³ has been described as "the United Nations' most ambitious effort ever to accelerate actions"⁴ to "make gender equality a lived reality."⁵ The launch of UN Women on February 24, 2011,⁶ crystallized decades of attempts to claw back from backsliding efforts, persistent setbacks, and ongoing frustrations and challenges to the promotion of gender equality following the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action ("Beijing Declaration") and the landmark Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).⁷

UN Women represents a composite entity that emerged from the consolidation of resources and mandates from four previously distinct parts of the UN: the UN Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), the Office of the Special

1. *In Historic Move, UN Creates Single Entity to Promote Women's Empowerment*, UNNEWS CENTRE (July 2, 2010), <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=35224> [hereinafter *Historic Move*].

2. Exec. Bd. of the United Nations Entity for Gend. Equal. & the Empowerment of Women, U.N. Women Strategic Plan, 2011–2013, ¶ 1, U.N. Doc. UNW/2011/9 (May 16, 2011), [hereinafter UN Women Strategic Plan, 2011–2013].

3. *Historic Move*, *supra* note 1.

4. Press Release, UN Women, UN Women Celebrates Launch as Powerful Driver of Women's Equality (Feb. 24, 2011), *available at* <http://www.unwomen.org/2011/02/un-women-celebrates-launch-as-powerful-driver-of-womens-equality/>.

5. Michelle Bachelet, Exec. Dir., *The Future of UN Women*, UN WOMEN (June 21, 2011), <http://www.unwomen.org/2011/06/the-future-of-un-women/> (transcribing a speech given by Michelle Bachelet, Exec. Dir., UN Women, at the New York Bar Association on June 21, 2011).

6. Press Release, UN Women, *supra* note 4.

7. See Farida Shaheed, *Structural Barriers, Cultural Constraints, Meso Traps & Other Challenges: Women's Empowerment in Institutional Mechanisms and Power & Decision-Making—The Beijing Platform for Action 15 Years On* 4–5, 9, 12 (UN ESCAP, Briefing Paper, 2009), *available at* http://www.wemc.com.hk/web/rf/Shahed_UNESCAP_Structural_barriers.pdf.

Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI), and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM).⁸ UN Women urges sustained action towards global advancement of women's issues in the areas of "women's economic empowerment, women's political participation and leadership, ending violence against women and girls, and engaging women and women's rights fully in peace and post-conflict processes and in national development planning and budgeting."⁹ At its 2011 Annual Session in New York, UN Women unveiled its first Strategic Plan.¹⁰ That plan, stretching from 2011 to 2013, delineates UN Women's central role in ensuring a more coherent attempt to advance gender equality throughout the world.¹¹ Premised upon six thematic focuses, the plan articulates UN Women's mandate—

(1) to increase women's leadership and participation in all areas that affect their lives; (2) to increase women's access to economic empowerment and opportunities, especially for those who are most excluded; (3) to prevent violence against women and girls (VAWG) and expand access to survivor services; (4) to increase women's leadership in peace and security and humanitarian response; and (5) to strengthen the responsiveness of plans and budgets to gender equality at all levels. The sixth goal involves support towards a comprehensive set of global norms, policies and standards on gender equality and women's empowerment that is dynamic, responds to new and emerging issues, challenges and opportunities and provides a firm basis for action by Governments and other stakeholders at all levels.¹²

The strategic plan commits the entity to a performance review in 2013, whereupon the impact of UN Women's work shall be available for review and, presumably, global scrutiny.¹³ By then, the world may perhaps be afforded a barometer as to how UN Women fares where others have faltered, since the entity inherits not only the extensive "solid standard-setting research, programming and advocacy experience"¹⁴ of its constituent predecessors, but also the same sets of challenges that have impeded their work and progress. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate on the individual

8. UN WOMEN, HOPES ARE HIGH 2 (2011), *available at* http://www.unwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/UNwomen_Brochure_en.pdf.

9. Bachelet, *supra* note 5.

10. UN Women Strategic Plan, 2011–2013, *supra* note 2.

11. *Id.*

12. *Id.*

13. *Id.*

14. UN WOMEN, *supra* note 8, at 2.

work of the four precursors to UN Women, a review of current gender-related indicators nonetheless reveals existing deep creases in gender equality and empowerment of women.¹⁵ A recent World Bank report entitled “Gender Equality and Development” clearly illustrates that gender disparities in mortality rates, poverty, economic participation, decision-making, and political participation, are still prevalent in all parts of the world, despite the visible reduction of the gender gap in education enrollment, life expectancy, and labor force participation.¹⁶ According to that report, female “deaths are estimated at about 3.9 million . . . each year”;¹⁷ while “two-fifths of [these females] are never born, one-sixth die in early childhood, and over one-third die in their reproductive years.”¹⁸ Girls and women constitute more than half of the population that is living with HIV/AIDS worldwide,¹⁹ and nearly seventy percent of women experience violence during their lifetimes.²⁰ An estimated 3.5 billion women and girls around the world still do not have full access to human, economic, and social rights.²¹ Additionally, “more than half of the 67 million primary school age children out of school are girls,”²² and over sixty percent of the world’s 1.3 billion poor are women.²³ On average, women do more work than men, producing fifty percent of the world’s food, but earning only ten percent of the world’s income and owning one percent of the world’s property.²⁴ UN Women estimates that women make up less than ten percent of world leaders, with only twenty-eight countries achieving the thirty percent

15. See THE INT’L BANK FOR RECONSTRUCTION & DEV./THE WORLD BANK, WORLD DEVELOPMENT REPORT 2012: GENDER EQUALITY AND DEVELOPMENT, xx–xxi (2011), *available at* <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTWDR2012/Resources/7778105-1299699968583/7786210-1315936222006/Complete-Report.pdf> (listing areas in which development has closed gender gaps and areas where gender gaps persist).

16. *Id.*

17. *Id.* at xxi.

18. *Id.*

19. *Statistics: Women and HIV/AIDS*, AMFAR, http://www.amfar.org/About_HIV_and_AIDS/Facts_and_Stats/Statistics__Women_and_HIV_AIDS/ (last updated Nov. 2011).

20. *Empowering Women and Girls Is Key to Address World’s Challenges*, UNICEF (Sept. 13, 2011), http://www.unicef.org/media/media_59778.html [hereinafter *Empowering Women Is Key*].

21. *3.5 Billion Women and Girls Don’t Fully Enjoy Rights*, UNITED NATIONS RADIO (Sept. 23, 2011), <http://www.unmultimedia.org/radio/english/2011/09/3-5-billion-women-and-girls-don-t-fully-enjoy-rights/> (summarizing a speech by Fredrik Reinfeldt, Prime Minister of Sweden, to the UN General Assembly).

22. *Empowering Women Is Key*, *supra* note 20.

23. Michele Bachelet, Exec. Dir., *Advance Women’s Rights, Change the World*, UN WOMEN (Nov. 18, 2011), <http://www.unwomen.org/2011/11/advance-womens-rights-change-the-world/> (transcribing Michele Bachelet’s keynote address at the Ford Foundation Event).

24. *3.5 Billion Women and Girls Don’t Fully Enjoy Rights*, *supra* note 21.

“critical mass mark for women’s representation in parliament.”²⁵ In addition, less than one in five cabinet positions across the world are held by a woman.²⁶

Globally, reverberating calls for action are fueled by the conviction that increased gender parity and empowerment of women is crucial in global efforts to stabilize population growth,²⁷ promote democracy, achieve sustainable development and peace,²⁸ and drive social justice and economic progress.²⁹ Confronted with a pressing need for reform, high hopes for results, and global reliance on its leadership, UN Women’s own Executive Director, Michelle Bachelet, is well aware of the intricacy of her charge: “So, how do we get from where we are now—the newest UN entity with an inspiring charter and high expectations but still enormous capacity yet to build—to becoming the Organization that can support the ambition contained in our Plan?”³⁰

To the extent that the accomplishment of gender equality hinges on social change,³¹ the herculean task for UN Women admittedly lies in successfully transforming deeply entrenched social norms. Because of its potential to mobilize social transformation, empowerment of women arguably becomes one of the most important vehicles for achieving greater gender parity in a socio-political structure. A cursory examination into existing gender policies and programs reveals that the tenor and extent to which they engage with the issue of women’s empowerment impinges on the direction and outcome of change, and the effectiveness of reducing the overall gender inequality in a society.³²

25. Press Release, UN Women, World Leaders Draw Attention to Central Role of Women’s Political Participation in Democracy (Sept. 19, 2011), *available at* <http://www.unwomen.org/2011/09/world-leaders-draw-attention-to-central-role-of-womens-political-participation-in-democracy/>.

26. *Id.*

27. Ariel Zirulnick, *As World Welcomes ‘7 Billionth Baby,’ UN Says Empowering Women Is Key to Stability*, CHRISTIAN SCI. MONITOR, Oct. 31, 2011, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Global-Issues/2011/1031/As-world-welcomes-7-billionth-baby-UN-says-empowering-women-is-key-to-stability>.

28. Press Release, UN Women, *supra* note 25.

29. Bachelet, *supra* note 23.

30. Michelle Bachelet, Exec. Dir., *Introductory Statement by Michelle Bachelet at the Annual Session of the UN Women Executive Board*, UN WOMEN (June 27, 2011), <http://www.unwomen.org/2011/06/introductory-statement-by-michelle-bachelet-at-the-annual-session-of-the-un-women-executive-board/> (transcribing an address by Michelle Bachelet at UN Women’s Executive Board Annual Session).

31. See ANNALISE MOSER, UNITED NATIONS DEV. PROGRAMME, GENDER AND INDICATORS: OVERVIEW REPORT 5 (Justina Demetriades ed., 2007), *available at* <http://www.bridge.ids.ac.uk/reports/IndicatorsORfinal.pdf> (“Achieving gender equality requires inspiring and mobilising social change.”).

32. *Id.* at 32 (“Many gender practitioners and policymakers now agree that gender equality and women’s empowerment are central to the achievement of each of the MDGs [Millennium Development Goals].”). One of the MDGs is human development. *Id.* at 33.

I. CONTEMPORARY CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

A. Linking Women Issues to Development Discourses

The last three decades have witnessed an increased emphasis on the empowerment of women in contemporary development discourses. The four world conferences on the global women's agenda held between 1975 and 1995 formed the backdrop against which the campaign to move women's issues into mainstream development agenda gained momentum.³³ This period saw the emergence of parallel non-governmental organizations' (NGOs) forums to official UN conferences that provided a critical alternative space for NGO representatives to network, share experiences, and lobby delegates.³⁴ The proliferation of women's movements in conjunction with this phenomenon generated a nearly five-fold increase in representatives from NGOs at these conferences over a twenty-year period.³⁵ Within the spheres of non-governmental engagement, it was the sustained participation in conferences and pre-conference activities, coalition-building caucuses, panels, and workshops by these representatives that gradually led to the establishment of a "global civil society" to champion causes related to women's issues.³⁶ Thereafter, the resulting expansion of the global network of women's NGOs brought transnational activism to the forefront.³⁷

Among various significant outcomes, these conferences served as catalyst for the synthesis of general platforms on development, known collectively as Women in Development (WID) and Gender and Development (GAD). Both WID and GAD effectively laid the conceptual groundwork upon which ensuing discourses on women and development have come to be framed.³⁸ Pioneered in the 1970s, the WID framework focused on practical needs and aims to integrate women into existing development processes and outcomes through the pursuit of legal, administrative, and institutional changes.³⁹ This framework substantively informed development policies until the 1990s,

33. Tani E. Barlow, *Asian Women in Reregionalization*, 15 POSITIONS 285, 300 (2007).

34. Laura Parisi, *Feminist Praxis and Women's Human Rights*, 1 J. HUM. RTS. 571, 575 (2002).

35. *Id.* at 580.

36. *See id.* at 580–81.

37. *See id.* at 581.

38. M. Patricia Connelly et al., *Feminism and Development: Theoretical Perspectives*, in THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT 51 (Jane L. Parpart et al. eds., 2000) ("WID tends to focus on practical needs, whereas GAD focuses on both practical needs and strategic interests.").

39. *See id.* at 51.

where, as a result of unrelenting lobbying by NGOs to engender a paradigm shift from a “needs-base[]” to a “rights-base[]” perspective,⁴⁰ it was supplanted by the GAD framework as the official discourse of development at the 1995 Fourth World Conference for Women in Beijing (“Beijing Conference”).⁴¹ Aiming to address strategic interests in addition to practical needs, the resulting paradigm shift entailed a parallel shift of focus from “women” to “gender” in addressing the bases of inequalities, reframing gender relations, and redistributing power inherent in gender relations.⁴²

B. Gender Mainstreaming

The Beijing Conference culminated in the Platform for Action, an unprecedented women’s rights document that employed “gender” rather than “biological sex” as a unit of analysis.⁴³ Conceived as “a tool for implementing global restructuring policies at the level of women’s experience,”⁴⁴ the Platform for Action obligates state signatories and international organizations to make a gender dimension explicit in all planned action, legislation, policy, and programs in all areas and at all levels and stages.⁴⁵ Known as “gender mainstreaming,” this strategy aims to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women through the integration of a gender dimension in all international governance, particularly in “the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in political, economic and societal spheres.”⁴⁶

Following the Beijing Conference, gender mainstreaming was co-opted into the development policies of key international organizations.⁴⁷ These include the United Nations and its specialized agencies, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

40. Nelly P. Stromquist, *Voice, Harmony, and Fugue in Global Feminism*, 12 GENDER & EDUC. 419, 428–29 (2000).

41. Cathy McIlwaine & Kavita Datta, *From Feminising to Engendering Development*, 10 GENDER, PLACE & CULTURE: J. FEMINIST GEOGRAPHY 369, 373 (2003).

42. *Id.* at 370–71.

43. Parisi, *supra* note 34, at 581.

44. Barlow, *supra* note 33, at 300.

45. See Emilie Hafner-Burton & Mark A. Pollack, *Mainstreaming Gender in Global Governance*, 8 EUR. J. INT’L REL. 339, 339–40 (2002).

46. NADIA HIJAB, UNITED NATIONS DEV. PROGRAMME, PRIMERS IN GENDER AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE: QUICK ENTRY POINTS TO WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT AND GENDER EQUALITY IN DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE CLUSTERS 3 (Jessica Hughes ed., 2007).

47. See *Mainstreaming Gender: Examples of Policies and Action Plans*, COMMON-WEALTH LEARNING, <http://www.col.org/resources/micrositeGender/Pages/mainstream.aspx> (last visited Mar. 30, 2012).

(UNESCO), and the International Labor Organization (ILO); commonwealth agencies, such as the Commonwealth Secretariat; development banks, such as the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the Asian Development Bank (ADB); development agencies, such as the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID); intergovernmental agencies, such as the Council of Europe and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD); and international NGOs, such as Action Aid and Oxfam.⁴⁸ The adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000, which called for gender mainstreaming in all aspects of community reconstruction and state building,⁴⁹ further propelled gender mainstreaming towards becoming the leading paradigm in modulating all international commitments and interventions.

Over the years, increased significance of the paradigm has led to widespread adoption of gender mainstreaming programs and policies across regional, national, and local levels.⁵⁰ Its prominence has further trickled over to civil society domains. Practices of gender mainstreaming abounded in non-profit organizations and operations through the embedment of gender issues into bureaucratic infrastructures, diffusion of such bureaucracies through transnational networks, and the advocacy of gender equality norms by these networks.⁵¹ Through extensive espousal by the international community, gender mainstreaming soon became the central pillar of all international development efforts.⁵²

Notwithstanding the increased centrality of gender mainstreaming in all international endeavors, scholars have invariably pointed out that the effectiveness of gender mainstreaming in promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women has yet to be sufficiently established.⁵³ At the outset, the real impact of gender mainstreaming in reducing gender inequality and advancing the empowerment of women has always been difficult to measure.⁵⁴ Institutions and

48. *Id.*

49. S.C. Res. 1325, U.N. Doc. S/RES/1325 (Oct. 31, 2000).

50. See *Mainstreaming Gender: Examples of Policies and Action Plans*, *supra* note 47.

51. See Elisabeth Prügl, *International Institutions and Feminist Politics*, 10 BROWN J. WORLD AFF., Winter/Spring 2004, at 69, 71.

52. Jane Parpart, *Fine Words, Failed Policies: Gender Mainstreaming in an Insecure and Unequal World*, in DEVELOPMENT IN AN INSECURE AND GENDERED WORLD: THE RELEVANCE OF THE MILLENNIUM GOALS 51, 54 (Jacqueline Leckie ed., 2009).

53. See, e.g., *id.* at 51 ("Gender mainstreaming policies, trumpeted as the technical fix for operationalizing gender equality and women's empowerment, have also achieved limited results." (citation omitted)).

54. MOSER, *supra* note 31, at 2.

organizations may appropriate the language of gender mainstreaming without fully understanding “its basic texts, concepts and methodologies”; some do so “without changing the existing economic policy framework.”⁵⁵

A 2003 United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) global survey highlighted these shortcomings.⁵⁶ The survey revealed that global implementation of gender mainstreaming has been fraught with difficulty due to confusion as to the scope and practical application of the paradigm.⁵⁷ According to the survey, policy and decision makers generally regarded the paradigm as vague and unclear, whereas many assumed that “mainstreaming simply involve[d] raising awareness of the basic disparities between women and men.”⁵⁸ In certain instances, gender mainstreaming is co-opted into existing organizational units. Gender mainstreaming becomes obscured by other concerns of the organization; it becomes a priority that is at best “everywhere but nowhere”⁵⁹ and at worst is simply cast aside by a lack of political will to oversee its implementation.⁶⁰

At the other end of the spectrum, over-enthusiastic adoption of the paradigm has resulted in circumstances where institutions squarely apply legal and policy templates to mainstream gender without clearly understanding the concept, strategies, and implications of implementation.⁶¹ Some regularly pay homage to mainstreaming agendas while inadvertently allowing the perpetuation of gender hegemonies.⁶² Even in instances where organizations were committed to its implementation, early progress gradually slowed to an ineffective pace as a result of inconsistent, “highly variable and voluntaristic

55. Jennifer Hales, *Rhetoric and Reality: World Bank and CIDA Gender Policies*, 40 CONVERGENCE 147, 159 (2007) (internal quotations omitted).

56. *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: Global Survey Results*, UNITED NATIONS POPULATION FUND, <http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2004/english/ch5/page2.htm> (last visited Mar. 30, 2012).

57. See *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: Challenges: Filling the Half-Empty Glass*, UNITED NATIONS POPULATION FUND, <http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2004/english/ch5/page5.htm> (last visited Mar. 30, 2012).

58. UNITED NATIONS POPULATION FUND (UNFPA), INVESTING IN PEOPLE: NATIONAL PROGRESS IN IMPLEMENTING THE ICPD PROGRAMME OF ACTION 1994–2004, at 31 (2004).

59. Jenny Riley, *IWDA Gender and Development Dialogue, 3–4 July 2003: Summary Report*, in WOMEN, GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE PACIFIC: KEY ISSUES—WOMEN AND GENDER MAINSTREAMING 149, 151 (Pamela Thomas ed., 2005), available at <http://devnet.anu.edu.au/GenderPacific/> [hereinafter WOMEN, GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE PACIFIC].

60. Suzette Mitchell, *What Lies at the Heart of the Failure of Gender Mainstreaming: The Strategy or the Implementation?*, in WOMEN, GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE PACIFIC, *supra* note 59, at 14, 17.

61. See Hales, *supra* note 55, at 159.

62. Prögl, *supra* note 51, at 70–71.

adoption of gender-sensitive policy-making, with intense focus on gender in some areas and little or no apparent activity in others.”⁶³

In the fifteen years since the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action, recurrent false starts and setbacks to effective implementation of gender mainstreaming have culminated in “an unusually high level of consensus . . . amongst many gender and development practitioners that gender mainstreaming as a strategy for achieving equality among men and women, and improving the lives of both, has largely failed.”⁶⁴ Rather than making inroads into promoting greater gender equality, the strategy has in fact “effectively drowned out the project of equality between women and men.”⁶⁵

Among several key reasons, the propensity of gender mainstreaming to lull institutions away from real, concerted efforts to transform power structures has been consistently cited as the prevailing obstacle towards achieving gender equality and the bettering of the lives of men and women.⁶⁶ In many parts of the world, efforts to promote gender equality have been and continue to be limited to a small number of areas such as legal reforms.⁶⁷ Rather than alleviating gender disparity, these efforts in fact have the potential to inflict graver harm when they serve merely to “mask and depoliticize[] gender inequalities which persist . . . in economic structures, institutions, private-public constructions, gendered divisions of labor, and gender ideologies of everyday life.”⁶⁸ Indeed, it comes as no surprise that “the realm of politics” in most, if not all, parts of the world continues to be masculine “in both an empirical and normative sense.”⁶⁹ In spite of vast distribution of gender mainstreaming guidelines, analytical tools, training manuals, expert meetings, resource databases, and measurement indicators, gender mainstreaming has failed to bring about the changes that were initially envisioned.⁷⁰

63. Emilie M. Hafner-Burton & Mark A. Pollack, *Mainstreaming Gender in the European Union: Getting the Incentives Right*, 7 COMP. EUR. POL. 114, 115 (2009).

64. Pamela Thomas, *Introduction: Women and Gender Mainstreaming*, in WOMEN, GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE PACIFIC, *supra* note 59, at 3, 3.

65. Hilary Charlesworth, *Not Waving but Drowning: Gender Mainstreaming and Human Rights in the United Nations*, 18 HARV. HUM. RTS. J. 1, 2 (2005).

66. See, e.g., Mitchell, *supra* note 60, at 15 (“Transformative gender mainstreaming is a challenge to implement, not only because of the inherently political nature of the agenda, but because of the scale of the nature of change required.”).

67. See Lynn R. Horton, *After Democracy: Advances and Challenges for Women's Movements in Latin America*, 49 LATIN AM. POL. & SOC'Y 165, 174 (2007).

68. *Id.*

69. Hiroko Takeda, *Gendering the Japanese Political System: The Gender-Specific Pattern of Political Activity and Women's Political Participation*, 26 JAPANESE STUD. 185, 186 (2006).

70. Parpart, *supra* note 52, at 54–55.

Schemes embodied in policy documents that pledge to promote greater general equality “remain[] little more than empty promises.”⁷¹

Yet, in spite of these shortfalls, many development agencies continue to insist that gender mainstreaming is “a doable, technical problem that can be overcome with sufficient determination and commitment.”⁷² Even in the midst of enduring constraints in conceptual clarity, expertise, comprehensive monitoring mechanisms, and resources,⁷³ these agencies remain steadfast in their conviction that gender mainstreaming is “guaranteed to work when applied with rigour and care.”⁷⁴ This belief appears to be anchored on the widely held neoliberal juridical perspective that “constructive engagement with rational state actors, supportive institutions and law abiding citizens” will eventually bring about the desired outcomes of gender equality and women’s empowerment.⁷⁵

C. Neoliberal Development Discourses

Research shows that neoliberal proponents often choose to articulate empowerment within a framework that asserts strong associations with ostensibly celebratory narratives of choice and agency.⁷⁶ As one of the forerunners spearheading the neoliberal economic agenda, the World Bank defines empowerment as “the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives.”⁷⁷ Such rhetoric of empowerment has time and again appeared in various policy documents of the World Bank since 1989.⁷⁸ Before long, “empowerment” became “a buzzword of the 1990s.”⁷⁹ By 2005, World Bank projected documentation containing the empowerment rhetoric totaled over 1800, whereupon “[e]mpowerment discourse became shorthand for women/gender-friendly World Bank policies and projects.”⁸⁰

71. Lorraine Corner, *Women Transforming the Mainstream—A Think Piece*, in WOMEN, GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE PACIFIC, *supra* note 59, at 19, 23.

72. Parpart, *supra* note 52, at 59.

73. See Mitchell, *supra* note 60, at 14.

74. Parpart, *supra* note 52, at 54 (citation omitted).

75. *Id.* at 60.

76. *Id.* at 53.

77. THE WORLD BANK, EMPOWERMENT AND POVERTY REDUCTION: A SOURCEBOOK 11 (2002), available at <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTEMPowerment/Resources/486312-1095094954594/draft.pdf>.

78. Hales, *supra* note 55, at 151.

79. Miranda Miles, *Rethinking Gender, Empowerment and Development*, in EMPOWERMENT THROUGH ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION 423, 430 (Meshack M. Khosa ed., 2001).

80. Parpart, *supra* note 52, at 53.

Nevertheless, such rhetoric of empowerment, pervasive as it is, has done little to conceal the increasingly negative impact of neoliberal development policies on the empowerment of women in many parts of the world. Along with the seemingly empty rhetoric, these faults have likewise attracted vigorous criticisms, skepticism, and debate.⁸¹ Many have begun to question whether mainstream development agencies, with “their emphasis on growth, their urban bias and their pursuit of industrialization,”⁸² share an earnest desire to address gender inequality, or whether the adoption of neo-populist sentiments merely cloaks the economic and political agenda.⁸³ This allegation is leveled from well documented evidence that development organizations premise their primary objectives on economic gains and institutional needs even at the expense of sacrificing their social goals.⁸⁴ Proponents of this view have cited, in support of this allegation, practices such as routine selective investments benefiting only a handful of states and leaving the rest of the world starved of cash, and the engagement of short-term projects, such as hedge funds, that promise a quick turnaround free from any accountability for resultant financial crises.⁸⁵

Claims of double standards have further been advanced to challenge the cost-benefit analyses employed by these organizations that continue to discount and undervalue unpaid work such as housework or voluntary enterprises.⁸⁶ Analysts assert that such unpaid but valuable work affects the opportunity costs of women’s time,⁸⁷ “contributes to the stocks of social capital,”⁸⁸ and acts “to cushion the impact on families and communities.”⁸⁹ Unfortunately, most mainstream development policy documents neither directly address or critically

81. See Hales, *supra* note 55, at 149 (“[F]eminist critics overwhelmingly argue that World Bank neoliberal restructuring policies are not only ‘gender-blind’ and exploit and oppress women, but actually ‘reinforce women’s oppression and rely on it in order to work.’” (footnote omitted) (internal citations omitted)).

82. Miles, *supra* note 79, at 430.

83. Hales, *supra* note 55, at 150 (illustrating the ways in which the World Bank’s neoliberal economic rationale only creates a “semblance of commitment” to social change (internal quotation marks omitted)).

84. See Maxine Molyneux, *Gender and the Silences of Social Capital: Lessons from Latin America*, 33 DEV. & CHANGE 167, 169–70 (2002) (discussing the issue of gender politics involved in “operationalizing social capital approaches”).

85. *Id.* at 172.

86. Horton, *supra* note 67, at 170.

87. ANNA FALTH & MARK BLACKDEN, UNITED NATIONS DEV. PROGRAMME, POLICY BRIEF: GENDER EQUALITY AND POVERTY REDUCTION: UNPAID CARE WORK 4–5 (Jeffrey Stem ed., 2009), available at http://content.undp.org/go/cms-service/stream/asset/?asset_id=3231016.

88. Molyneux, *supra* note 84, at 184.

89. Press Release, UN Women, UN Women Highlights Robust Measures to Enhance Women’s Economic Empowerment (Oct. 5, 2011), available at <http://www.unwomen.org/2011/10/un-women-highlights-robust-measures-to-enhance-womens-economic-empowerment/> (internal quotation marks omitted).

engage in gender and women related issues,⁹⁰ nor feature realistic time frames, critical self-reflexivity, mechanisms to effect structural adjustments,⁹¹ or a serious commitment to impartial evaluations.⁹² Unsurprisingly, neoliberal rhetoric of empowerment has since earned the disrepute of typifying “a minor sideshow to the real issues of economic growth.”⁹³

Far from being gender-blind, neoliberal development policies have been alleged to “reinforce women’s oppression and rely on it in order to work.”⁹⁴ Observable negative impacts include a greater wage gap between men and women, the deterioration of working conditions, weakened social safety nets, and an overall decline in the welfare of women and girls.⁹⁵ In reality, it has been argued that development agencies recognize that women are central to mobilizing social capital in poverty reduction and development programs,⁹⁶ even when these organizations seem to be oblivious to the onslaught of perpetuated gender inequality, a phenomenon which has the real potential to plunge the world-wide disempowerment of women into a “downward spiral.”⁹⁷

Such grave neglect makes the exoneration of superfluous and insincere avowals of empowerment goals difficult to sustain. Policies such as the World Bank’s Enforceable Operational Policy (OP 4.20), which contains “a critical footnote excluding programme loans from the requirement to address gender disparities,”⁹⁸ have all but undermined the organization’s integrity in the advancement of gender equality and empowerment of women. Some caution that, upon a closer look:

[W]hat appears at first sight to hold some semblance of responsiveness to feminist demands reveals itself as a simulacrum. “Empowerment-lite” looks like the real thing. It sounds like the

90. See Molyneux, *supra* note 84, at 178 (discussing the cultural norms that allow antiquated power relations to persist in situating women as volunteers and homemakers).

91. See, e.g., Hales, *supra* note 55, at 154 (discussing the World Bank’s “lack of critical self-reflexivity”).

92. Elaine Zuckerman, *Huge Gaps in the World Bank’s Gender Action Plan*, BRETTON WOODS PROJECT (Jan. 31, 2007), <http://www.brettonwoodsproject.org/art-549094> (noting several problems embedded in the structure of the World Bank’s Gender Action Plan and noting that only one civil society organization partner will design and conduct evaluations).

93. Parpart, *supra* note 52, at 52.

94. Hales, *supra* note 55, at 149 (citation omitted) (internal quotation marks omitted).

95. Stephanie Seguino, *Gender Inequality in a Globalizing World* 7–8 (Levy Econ. Inst. Bard Coll., Working Paper No. 426, 2005), available at http://www.levyinstitute.org/pubs/wp_426.pdf.

96. Molyneux, *supra* note 84, at 177.

97. Press Release, UN Women, *supra* note 89.

98. Zuckerman, *supra* note 92.

real thing . . . from organising women into groups to providing training, resources and rules that get more women into work and into politics. But is it really doing anything to address the underlying structural inequalities and pervasive discrimination . . . ?⁹⁹

D. One-Size-Fits-All Empowerment Paradigm

Increased instances of casualties and destructive outcomes among people who were severely impacted by the negative aspects of these policies have invigorated advocates for gender equality and the empowerment of women to take development organizations to task for their “reckless, grow-at-any-cost strategy” and one-size-fits-all empowerment paradigm.¹⁰⁰ Many have taken pains to point out the peril of subscribing wholesale to the rhetoric of empowerment, which in many parts of the world, particularly in developing countries, “has come to be regarded by many mainstream development agencies as a destination that can be reached through the development equivalent of a motorway: fast-track programmes which can be rolled out over any terrain.”¹⁰¹

According to them, this trend is replicated through widespread practices of linking “empowerment” with schemes such as microcredits, high-interest loans, and small-scale businesses that not only inhibit people’s potential to flourish, but tend to keep them in poverty.¹⁰² Scholars have added their voices to bemoan the proliferation of such “fragmented, inflexible, and non-responsive” programs, which, in their view, “at best provide a crude safety net” for women¹⁰³ and at worst have the effect of completely undermining their agency to negotiate the constraints of their everyday lives.¹⁰⁴

II. AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO CONCEPTUALIZE THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

The disconnect between extensive attempts towards empowerment of women and the reality of ordinary women’s lives behooves

99. Andrea Cornwall, *Pathways of Women’s Empowerment*, OPENDEMOCRACY (July 30, 2007), http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/pathways_of_womens_empowerment.

100. See *Microfinance*, N.Y. TIMES, <http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/subjects/m/microfinance/index.html> (last updated Nov. 18, 2010) (describing “for-profit ‘social enterprises’ that seek to make money while filling a social need” and relaying the concerns of some regarding how these enterprises are run).

101. Cornwall, *supra* note 99.

102. See *Microfinance*, *supra* note 100.

103. April Bernard, *The 21st Century Caribbean Woman’s Question: What Is the Meaning of Freedom?*, J. E. CARIBBEAN STUD., Sept. 2008, at 1, 11.

104. Cornwall, *supra* note 99.

practitioners and decision makers to conceptualize the empowerment of women within a broader social policy agenda that recognizes deeply embedded structural inequities that shape their experience, and the complexities that permeate the reality of women's everyday lives. Such a social policy calls for the need to consider the structures in which social actors live and operate, as well their voices of experience, if advocates are serious about instituting reforms that would bring sustainable change.¹⁰⁵ This argument finds support in analyses that document the instrumentality of grounding the notion of empowerment in the articulated experiences of social actors as a means to better understand how societal structures define, frame, constrain, and enable the process of empowerment.¹⁰⁶ Through this approach, a strategy that assimilates local needs into the broader framework could in due course be put in place to steer development and reform onto the right path towards sustainability.

A. Multifaceted Nature of Identity

The impetus to adopt an ethnographic approach in conceptualizing the empowerment of women predicates on the recognition that "social identities gain their meaning," not through an automatic attachment to individuals, but through "the practice of everyday life."¹⁰⁷ Social groups organized around citizenship, residence, geographic origin, history, gender, class, ethnicity, religion, politics, profession, etc., aggregate the pluralities of human identity that shape the lives of individuals.¹⁰⁸ As such, individuals have the ability to self-ascribe to any number of combinations of identity markers and to decide which to recognize, value, and defend.¹⁰⁹ Self-ascribed identity may, however, encompass certain dominant facets that transcend divides, such as migrants who may choose to anchor their identities in their

105. *New European Gender Equality Strategy Must Actively Engage Women*, END FGM (Sept. 21, 2010), <http://www.endfgm.eu/en/news-and-events/news/press-releases/new-european-gender-equality-strategy-must-actively-engage-women-0041/> ("[T]he next step is to learn from the experiences of the affected women in the implementation process." (quoting Dr. Christine Loudes, Dir., END FGM European Campaign)).

106. See Shirin M. Rai et al., (Re)defining Empowerment, Measuring Survival 21–22, (May 3–5, 2007) (unpublished paper), available at <http://www.ethicsofempowerment.org/papers/RaiEmpowerment.pdf> (noting the importance of grounding engagement at the local level).

107. Dorothy Holland & Debra Skinner, *Literacies of Distinction: (Dis)Empowerment in Social Movements*, 44 J. DEV. STUD. 849, 859 (2008).

108. AMARTYA SEN, *IDENTITY AND VIOLENCE: THE ILLUSION OF DESTINY* 4–5 (2006) ("None of them can be taken to be the person's only identity . . .").

109. See *id.* at 6.

faith, kinship networks, or other factors that are considered more dominant than others in impacting their experience.¹¹⁰

The intersections of these identities add significant nuances to the experience of individuals, as they compel individuals to negotiate their experience within an amalgam of structural configurations.¹¹¹ Hence, for the Czech woman, navigating her identity within “competing discourses of liberal capitalism, socialism, Western feminism, and Eastern European egalitarianism,”¹¹² identity is best understood as fluid and constantly evolving, which can be constructed, altered, and modulated in reference to interactions with other individuals, situations, time, social contexts, and the processes of existing social structures.¹¹³ In terms of women’s empowerment, this portends wider social and political implications. Horton explains:

Given women’s multifaceted identities, we need greater exploration of the processes—political opportunity structures, institutions, social movements, informal interactions—that influence which women’s identities become salient at particular junctures and take priority in claims and action. Likewise, how do women themselves, as individuals and collectively, strategically manage intersecting identities, the ways identities may both overlap and contradict themselves? An important task for feminist scholars and activists is the exploration of processes and spaces through which women’s representations and interests on a local, national, and transnational scale can be negotiated and more deeply democratized.¹¹⁴

B. Impact of Globalization

The multifaceted nature of identities necessarily means that there will be as many divergences as convergences on women’s issues and interests among different social contexts across the world. The phenomenon of globalization adds to this complexity.¹¹⁵ The impact of globalization on the empowerment of women is articulated through the diversity, fragmentation, and disintegration of conventional power structures inherent in postmodern societies.¹¹⁶ Through

110. See Haleh Afshar, *Women, Wars, Citizenship, Migration, and Identity: Some Illustrations from the Middle East*, 43 J. DEV. STUD. 237, 241 (2007).

111. See Prügl, *supra* note 51, at 77.

112. *Id.*

113. See Jinn Winn Chong, *Identity-Based Conflicts: Perceived Difference vs. Perceived Threat*, J. INT’L SERVICE, Fall 2009, at 77, 79.

114. Horton, *supra* note 67, at 175.

115. See Susan M. Shaw, *Conceptualizing Resistance: Women’s Leisure as Political Practice*, 33 J. LEISURE RES. 186, 194 (2001).

116. *Id.*

migration and displacement of identities, globalization enlargens and deepens the lives and experience of men and women.¹¹⁷ Additionally, implementation of global development programs further impacts their experience in the marketplace.¹¹⁸ When women's availability becomes increasingly sought after for low-wage competition in the labor market and for emerging forms of informal markets, the resulting increased representation in the low-income sector would only impede women's access to various social safety nets.¹¹⁹ Although global chains have produced linkages among women in the world, the interconnections produced by such linkages, in effect, highlight how shared issues such as child care are experienced in different ways. Some examples include "the American career woman needing access to child care[,] the immigrant nanny who is denied access to her own children[,] and the mother struggling to feed and shelter her family on the streets of Manila."¹²⁰

In light of these complexities, an ethnographic approach is best equipped to capture the nuances of women's struggles and experiences as they impinge on issues related to empowerment. In this respect, an ethnographic approach in conceptualizing the empowerment of women neither expects women to "wipe the slate clean" by unlearning all experiences that they have acquired, nor to embrace a sea change of view points before empowerment can be attained.¹²¹ It provides women with pragmatic insights to engage and work with the reality that empowerment is unlikely to be a linear process, as advocacy efforts may lead women's rights and gender parity to "expand in certain spheres" and to "diminish in others."¹²²

III. ENGENDERING ENABLING ENVIRONMENTS

The enabling environments approach supports a process of empowerment rooted within the experience of women themselves by putting in place the necessary conditions that facilitate the process of empowerment. The creation of these enabling environments is thus envisioned to take place at all personal, social, political, and

117. See Catherine Egeland & Randi Gressgård, *The "Will to Empower": Managing the Complexity of the Others*, 15 NORA: NORDIC J. WOMEN'S STUD. 207, 207 (2007).

118. Stromquist, *supra* note 40, at 427.

119. *Id.*

120. Allison Weir, *Global Feminism and Transformative Identity Politics*, HYPATIA, Fall 2008, at 110, 115.

121. See Sarah D. Phillips, *Civil Society and Healing: Theorizing Women's Social Activism in Post-Soviet Ukraine*, 70 ETHNOS: J. ANTHROPOLOGY 489, 502 (2005) (internal quotation marks omitted).

122. See Horton, *supra* note 67, at 167.

conceptual levels that collectively form the social space they inhabit. This includes all spheres of influence that impact their everyday experiences. This approach presupposes that the journey towards empowerment of women will be long and fraught with challenges. As such, the creation of enabling environments rooted within their experience springs from the need to meet this challenge, as one of the primary objectives of the enterprise is to lay groundwork to support successive efforts in the project of empowerment.

A. Human Development as an Integral Element of Empowerment

The concept of human development advocates for the understanding of diversity in all its manifestations in human lives with a view to provide the necessary conditions for the development and flourishing of their capabilities on their own terms.¹²³ In this regard, research shows that places where human development is pronounced are also locations that have seen significant progress in reducing gender inequality.¹²⁴ Taking cognizance of the fact that people hold deep knowledge about their lives and experiences, an ethnographic approach in conceptualizing the empowerment of women in this instance encourages women to consult their own experiences to identify factors that would contribute to the creation of enabling environments at the personal, social, and political levels.¹²⁵ The knowledge base that they develop in the process would add to a growing body of knowledge that has the real potential to engender sustainable change in their society.¹²⁶

It has further been argued that each individual occupies a social space in any given political sphere. Because every individual's biography is made up of concrete experiences, values, motivations, and emotions, the social space is unique to that individual.¹²⁷ Since no two individuals, and hence no two women, occupy the same social space, each woman will have a different starting point in her journey

123. See SEN, *supra* note 108, at 149–50 (describing two approaches to multiculturalism).

124. See Bernard, *supra* note 103, at 15 (discussing freedom as a guiding principle for liberating society).

125. See Caitlin Cahill, *The Personal Is Political: Developing New Subjectivities Through Participatory Action Research*, 14 GENDER, PLACE & CULTURE: J. FEMINIST GEOGRAPHY 267, 268 (2007).

126. See A. Pessate-Schubert, *'The Sky Is the Limit': Higher Education, Gender and Empowerment in the Bedouin Community in the Negev in Israel*, 34 COMPARE: J. COMP. EDUC. 329, 332–34 (2004) (describing education as a catalyst of social change).

127. PATRICIA HILL COLLINS, BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT: KNOWLEDGE, CONSCIOUSNESS, AND THE POLITICS OF EMPOWERMENT 285 (2d ed. 2000).

towards the attainment of empowerment.¹²⁸ Therefore, the challenge is to help women develop a more perceptive awareness of the dynamics of empowerment so that they can easily locate their individual starting points. At this level, the approach seeks to legitimize and affirm their experience in the effort to prepare them to become drivers of the empowerment process.

B. Cultural Contexts and Institutional Norms

At the outset, the creation of enabling environments at the wider socio-political level entails an examination into the institutional norms and cultural contexts that define societal expectations of sex and gender.¹²⁹ All across the world, women live in societies where gendered institutions form a salient part of their reality. In this reality, “women are excluded from most formal and influential political activities, and their inclusion is premised on their ability to don masculine attributes.”¹³⁰ Confronted with this inscribed epistemology, a reconceptualization of this otherwise ominous reality becomes necessary in all empowerment endeavors, because “[w]ithout a framework that inscribes women’s current activism in a larger perspective . . . that resignifies the meaning of womanhood, . . . women who are discovering their own power may have a hard time identifying it as a woman’s attribute. Women’s activism and courage may be interpreted as ‘manly’ instead.”¹³¹

A reconceptualization of societal expectations of sex and gender begins with the problematization of the notions that make up and inform these expectations, such as femininity, power, oppression, agency, socio-political participation, and social relationships. The inquiry is carried out through the lens of women’s own experiences within a particular community, society, or nation-state so that through engagement with wider parameters of women’s issues and interests in the contexts in which they live, they will be able to develop the ability

128. See Chitra Sankaran & Chng Huang Hoon, “We Women Aren’t Free to Die”: *Transacting Asian Sexualities in a Feminism Classroom in Singapore*, 36 *CRITICAL ASIAN STUD.* 285, 297 (2004) (describing women’s “divided consciousness, as daughters of male tradition and sisters in a feminist movement”).

129. Fiona Mackay, *Gender and Political Representation in the UK: The State of the Discipline*, 6 *BRIT. J. POL. & INT’L REL.* 99, 111 (2004) (discussing the “gender meaning of particular roles or work,” especially in atypical areas for women, such as politics).

130. Maureen Sander-Staudt, *Reassembling Political Assemblies: Care Ethics and Political Agency*, 39 *J. SOC. PHIL.* 269, 286 (2008).

131. Barbara Sutton, *Poner el Cuerpo: Women’s Embodiment and Political Resistance in Argentina*, *LATIN AM. POL. & SOC’Y*, Summer 2007, at 129, 153–54.

to recognize, confront, and fight gender inequality in all their guises within formal and informal realms.¹³²

IV. RECONCEPTUALIZING DISCURSIVE NARRATIVES

A. *Public/Private Dichotomy*

There has been a growing awareness that individual, social, and political bodies are inherently connected and interact dialectically to create institutions, negotiate meaning-making, and manipulate discourses.¹³³ Historically, “the public domain of politics” is characterized as “gendered male” and the “private sphere of the home” as “gendered female.”¹³⁴ In most, if not all parts of the world, all political activity, whether through state institutions and policy making bodies or within the civil society sphere, constitute “space[s] structured by gendered relations of unequal power . . . [that] are male-dominated.”¹³⁵

The public-private divide is a powerful construct that has operated to exclude women’s participation in politics by defining “what counts as political and where it occurs.”¹³⁶ An example of how this is played out can be seen in water issues in Latin America. By narrowly framing “[w]omen’s use of water . . . in terms of the domestic, private sphere of health, hygiene, and basic family needs,” women’s water claims have largely been “relegate[d] . . . to the ‘apolitical’ realm of social welfare and charity.”¹³⁷ Compared with the use of water for irrigation and economic production that is defined as masculine, women’s voice in water management became limited.¹³⁸

As a general rule, women’s “activities are [more] likely to be framed as private, apolitical, marginal, and even invisible,” even when they enter new fields.¹³⁹ Such rigid public-private representations not only fail to reflect the shifting realities of women’s disproportionate burden of labor, but they often grossly neglect to consider as relevant many of women’s activities that have political meanings. Economic restructuring as a consequence of neoliberal policies have resulted in the exploitation of women’s role in social reproduction and their marginal positions in the capitalist economy through reliance on

132. Horton, *supra* note 67, at 174; Sutton, *supra* note 131, at 143.

133. See Phillips, *supra* note 121, at 508.

134. Barbara Einhorn & Charlotte Sever, *Gender and Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe*, 5 INT’L FEMINIST J. POL. 163, 167 (2003).

135. *Id.*

136. See *id.* at 167–68.

137. Horton, *supra* note 67, at 167.

138. *Id.*

139. *Id.* at 167–68.

women's unpaid, volunteer community care-taking as more and more social welfare services become privatized in most countries. Increased reliance on such volunteer work forbodes the danger that the phenomenon of women's unpaid labor would quickly "become permanent and institutionalized," particularly in times of economic distress. It would also further weaken women's claims to status and power.¹⁴⁰

Conversely, at the personal level, women have a greater propensity to assign themselves "private, aesthetic and affective roles, while men continue to be associated more with public and instrumental roles."¹⁴¹ Susinos argues that women's aspiration for aesthetics embodies the gender power imbalances since time immemorial. Being historically dependent on male approval, aesthetic concerns convey "a clear political meaning insofar as it is one more tool of control and unequal power" used to "place[] women in a subordinate role."¹⁴²

In this context, empowerment calls for the destabilization of the public-private boundary "in order to make visible the political nature of women's activity."¹⁴³ A crucial step towards empowerment is thus to help women grasp the political significance of their everyday activities and personal experiences, and to identify the socio-political dynamics that are played out through them.¹⁴⁴ Arguably, this would help illuminate the many instances where the public and private spheres overlap and, corollary to that, the many ways in which women's activities contribute to perpetuate the existing social structures, as well as the many possibilities through which the activities could help steer social change. It is envisaged that this would serve to hold up for scrutiny women's role in the social structures that they inhabit. In this regard, their involvement, whether as actors of status quo or as agents of change, will become equally visible to themselves and to others in society.

B. Femininity

Conventionally, discourses on femininity tend to invoke essentialist connotations borne of societal expectations of sex and gender that tend to overlook the subjectivity inherent in women's own perceptions

140. *See id.* at 170.

141. Teresa Susinos et al., *Becoming a Woman: The Construction of Female Subjectivities and its Relationship with School*, 21 GENDER & EDUC. 97, 105 (2009).

142. *Id.* at 106.

143. Einhorn & Sever, *supra* note 134, at 167.

144. *See* Kristin McGuire et al., *Becoming Feminist Activists: Comparing Narratives*, 36 FEMINIST STUD. 99, 99 (2010) (presenting case studies of four women, who each noted the importance of "growing awareness that the political is personally relevant and that personal experiences have political meaning" in their journey to empowerment).

of femininity.¹⁴⁵ In various parts of the world, women are encouraged to be “delicate, soft, fragile, agreeable, and sexually attractive to men,”¹⁴⁶ as well as to use their tenderness and beauty to complement men “in order to create peaceful and harmonious relationships.”¹⁴⁷ According to Sutton, “[t]hese cultural norms permeate and get reproduced through key institutions, including the media and the family, and even through economic imperatives promoting industries such as fashion, tourism, or other jobs that require women’s . . . [g]ood appearance[] as a condition for work.”¹⁴⁸

Yet, far from constituting a universal understanding, the definition of femininity is nonetheless highly varied across the world. Evidence shows that some women adopt conceptions of femininity that incorporate traits typically considered masculine, as in the case of the Samiti women in India who regard being armed as feminine due to basing their femininity around a religious tradition of warrior goddesses.¹⁴⁹ In some cases, views of femininity may be profoundly militarized, as in the case of female combatants in the Liberation Tigers Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who adopt the persona of an “armed virgin” in defining their femininity.¹⁵⁰ Indeed, the extent of subjectivity in conceptualizing femininity could not have been better explained than in Sutton’s remark: “Indeed, multiple versions of femininity may coexist in the same woman’s body.”¹⁵¹

These illustrations demonstrate that a woman’s conception of her femininity is invariably molded and modulated by the social contexts in which she lives, the prevailing institutional norms, and the customs practiced by her community.¹⁵² These cultural codes “define[] how women are *allowed* to act, think, desire, prefer and conceive of themselves and others.”¹⁵³ Even in the case of the Samiti women, feminine power is only acceptable on the condition that the

145. Bernard, *supra* note 103, at 9 (discussing the concepts of negative and positive liberty and the idea that, “[w]hile expressions of freedom may be subjectively restricted by perceptions of self, . . . modernity and morality are intricately bound by the limits of ‘self within the collective.’”).

146. Sutton, *supra* note 131, at 136.

147. Fang-chih Irene Yang, *Beautiful-and-Bad Woman: Media Feminism and the Politics of Its Construction*, 33 FEMINIST STUD. 361, 370 (2007).

148. Sutton, *supra* note 131, at 136–37.

149. Manuela Ciotti, *At the Margins of Feminist Politics? A Comparative Analysis of Women in Dalit Politics and Hindu Right Organisations in Northern India*, 15 CONTEMP. S. ASIA 437, 445 (2006).

150. Tahira Gonsalves, *Media Manipulations and Agency: Women in the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) of Sri Lanka*, AHFAD J., Dec. 2005, at 36, 36, 40, 41.

151. Sutton, *supra* note 131, at 151.

152. See Bernard, *supra* note 103, at 12.

153. *Id.* at 11–12.

boundaries of chastity and virtue are not transgressed.¹⁵⁴ Bound by the societal code, the lives and perception of these strong, articulate Samiti women “remain anchored in a context that valorizes asexual, chaste, [sic] women who are responsible for the honor of their body, family and nation.”¹⁵⁵

In this regard, the association of women with sacrificial, maternal, self-giving attributes is commonly justified on the basis of women’s biology and reproductive capacities.¹⁵⁶ In a high number of instances, the promotion of this physiological aspect is systemically supported by social institutions. In Argentina, the State, joined by the Catholic Church and the education system, undertakes this enterprise. The self-giving aspects of maternal embodiment are glorified¹⁵⁷ and teachers hailed as “second mothers” to children are expected to accept “low wages and substandard working conditions without protest.”¹⁵⁸ Women are further expected to devote their energy to family and community, even at the expense of their own needs.¹⁵⁹

Women, pressured from social expectations, often forego public activities in order to care for others. Women who aspire to public office in the United States find themselves caught in traditional sex and gender roles ascription, where they face the risk of appearing less politically competent if they are primary caregivers.¹⁶⁰ Female politicians are also often expected to “distance themselves from caring-for in order to compensate for the stronger association between femininity and care.”¹⁶¹

The perpetuation of these stereotypes is guaranteed by the internalization of these societal codes by women themselves. Surveys and analyses point to the preponderance of women to cultivate personal characteristics that

represent femininity *par excellence*: friendliness, sociability, embarrassment, spontaneity, etc. These are, without doubt, all the qualities necessary for performing the social roles that have traditionally had more bearing on the course of women’s lives: housekeeping, the care and feeding of the family, keeping the

154. Sikata Banerjee, *Armed Masculinity, Hindu Nationalism and Female Political Participation in India: Heroic Mothers, Chaste Wives and Celibate Warriors*, 8 INT’L FEMINIST J. POL. 62, 71–72 (2006).

155. *Id.* at 72.

156. Sutton, *supra* note 131, at 135.

157. *Id.* (“The church exalts the Virgin Mary and her maternal role as a model that women should follow.”).

158. *Id.* at 135–36 (internal quotation marks omitted).

159. *See id.*

160. Sander-Staudt, *supra* note 130, at 271.

161. *Id.*

home running smoothly on a day-to-day basis, the education of the children, etc.; in short, what has for years been known as performing roles in the private sphere (as opposed to the public sphere). These tasks are directly related to . . . the distribution of gender-defined roles within the hierarchy of functions whose social and economic value are conferred by society.¹⁶²

The internationalization of these societal codes often transcends mere aspirations in cases where women not only enforce stereotypes of femininity on other women, but act in ways that reinforce their own subjugation to undermine their sexual and individual agency and in the process perpetuate the cycle of oppression.¹⁶³ A reconceptualization of the notion of femininity therefore necessitates the infusion of cultural contexts to support the contention that all actors within a social sphere are products of the prevailing structural configurations of the system.¹⁶⁴ This emphasizes that all actors, whether men, women, boys, or girls, are products of the social structure and perform the reality as they experience it. Discussions should therefore move away from attributions and blame, and center on examining the societal structures that contribute to social inequities.

C. Power

The most vital part of reconceptualizing the notion of power as it is related to empowerment of women is in its definition. Significant emphasis should be made at the outset to convey the multifaceted and multidimensional nature of power. It is worth noting that social psychologists have typically regarded power not as a fixed entity, but as multifarious, omnipresent, and susceptible to changes across time and contexts.¹⁶⁵ Although discourses of power tend to highlight its negative manifestations, such as domination, oppression, and inhibition of access to resources, researchers have observed that power may also be used to promote social change or to maintain the status quo of society.¹⁶⁶ Power should therefore be understood as both a source of oppression and a source of emancipation.¹⁶⁷ Within feminist jurisprudence, the notion of power “combines understandings of power as

162. Susinos et al., *supra* note 141, at 99 (citation omitted).

163. See Shireen Hassim, *Democracy's Shadows: Sexual Rights and Gender Politics in the Rape Trial of Jacob Zuma*, 68 AFR. STUD. 57, 70 (2009).

164. See Sankaran & Hoon, *supra* note 128, at 294.

165. Isaac Prilleltensky, *The Role of Power in Wellness, Oppression, and Liberation: The Promise of Psychopolitical Validity*, 36 J. COMMUNITY PSYCHOL. 116, 119 (2008).

166. *Id.* at 118.

167. Shaminder Takhar, *Expanding the Boundaries of Political Activism*, 13 CONTEMP. POL. 123, 131 (2007).

domination ('power-over'), empowerment and resistance ('power-to'), and solidarity ('power-with')."¹⁶⁸ According to Prügl, the routinization of these agential forms of power typifies the expressions of hierarchies and hegemonies:

Hierarchy describes power in organizations . . . ; hegemony describes power in institutions The production of organizational hierarchies is based on the ability of the powerful to command compliance as a result of their disproportionate access to resources regardless of the will of the subordinate. The production of hegemonies, on the other hand, entails the consent of the ruled, indeed their adoption of the ideas of the rulers.¹⁶⁹

The imperative to gain a better understanding of the multiple dimensions and manifestations of power is driven by the recognition that power may be cloaked in subtlety.¹⁷⁰ Such concealed power invariably has the potential to be internalized and held out as self-regulation.¹⁷¹ Occasionally, power may also be "hidden under a mantle of neutrality."¹⁷² Scholars have further asserted that "power" not only exists in every human relationship,¹⁷³ but always exists in both political and psychological forms.¹⁷⁴ Power structures in a socio-political sphere therefore consist of complex webs of power where actors can simultaneously be members of both the dominant and subordinate groups.¹⁷⁵ Additionally, these power structures encompass matrices of domination structured on the personal, groups, and systemic levels, thereby generating a larger matrix of domination along multiple axes of identity markers, such as race, class, gender, religion, ethnicity, etc.¹⁷⁶ Hence, a Caucasian woman may simultaneously belong to a subordinate group as a consequence of her gender, as well as a dominant

168. Prügl, *supra* note 51, at 76 (footnote omitted).

169. *Id.* (footnote omitted).

170. See Prilleltensky, *supra* note 165, at 117 ("Power operates in subtle ways because it is usually hidden under a mantle of neutrality of larger discourses about science, truth, and justice." (citation omitted)).

171. *Id.* at 127.

172. *Id.* at 117.

173. See 1 MICHEL FOUCAULT, *The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom*, in ETHICS: SUBJECTIVITY AND TRUTH 281, 283 (Paul Rabinow ed., Robert Hurley et. al. trans., 1997) ("Power relations are extremely widespread in human relationships. . . . [T]here is in human relationships a whole range of power relationships that may come into play among individuals, within families, in pedagogical relationships, political life, and so on.").

174. Prilleltensky, *supra* note 165, at 119.

175. See, e.g., COLLINS, *supra* note 127, at 246 (describing the status of White women in the U.S. at one point in their history: privileged on the basis of race and citizenship, but disadvantaged based on their gender).

176. See *id.* at 245–46 (discussing the Black female diaspora and transversal politics).

group by virtue of her race/ethnicity. An Asian-American bisexual woman with a Masters Degree may belong to several subordinate groups in the societal matrix of hierarchy by virtue of her gender, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation, but she may at the same time claim membership to a dominant group on the basis of class.

Yet, theories of power and hegemony have repeatedly stressed that power is never absolute. It is continually negotiated and renegotiated, and discourses and hegemony could always be replaced by counter-discourses and counter-hegemony.¹⁷⁷ The multiplicity of power locations therefore denotes potential sites for resisting and challenging the inherent power structures.

D. Oppression

Like power, oppression can take many forms. Psychologists have emphasized that psychological and political oppression can, and often do, co-exist.¹⁷⁸ Oppression can be directed both outwards and inwards.¹⁷⁹ Both forms carry political implications. The general characterization of oppression illustrates the former, where, typified as "asymmetric power relations between individuals, genders, classes, communities, and nations," it spawns circumstances that "lead to conditions of misery, inequality, exploitation, marginalization, and social injustices."¹⁸⁰ Oppressive conditions in turn breed fears, addictions, compulsions, and other psychological restraints that inhibit action and stifle self-expression.¹⁸¹

In addition, interlocking systems of oppression further affect individuals who are concurrently impacted by repressive policies across several axes such as class, race, gender, religion, and ethnicity.¹⁸² Depending on the context, individuals may be "oppressors in some settings, oppressed in others, or simultaneously oppressing and oppressed."¹⁸³ The multiple dynamics of oppression, including self-inflicted oppression, have made the understanding of multiple societal hierarchies a highly complex venture since any given "matrix of domination contains few pure victims or oppressors."¹⁸⁴ For advocates of

177. See ANTONIO GRAMSCI, *Philosophy—Politics—Economics*, in SELECTIONS FROM THE PRISON NOTEBOOKS OF ANTONIO GRAMSCI 745, 746 (Quentin Hoare & Geoffrey Nowell Smith eds., trans., 1999) (1971).

178. See Prilleltensky, *supra* note 165, at 128.

179. Bernard, *supra* note 103, at 8 (describing the concepts of negative and positive liberty).

180. Prilleltensky, *supra* note 165, at 127.

181. Bernard, *supra* note 103, at 8.

182. See Takhar, *supra* note 167, at 127 (describing "interlocking systems of oppression" during the feminist movement of the 1970s).

183. COLLINS, *supra* note 127, at 246.

184. *Id.* at 287.

empowerment, it is perhaps most important to recognize that oppression, like power, can be produced and contested at all levels.¹⁸⁵

Among incidents of structural oppression, unequal distribution and access to resources have been cited as two of the key factors in perpetuating gender inequality in society.¹⁸⁶ This is a view that finds support from the Executive Director of UN Women, Michelle Bachelet, for she believes that it is through economic empowerment of women that continued erosion of women's rights and gender disparity worldwide could be contained and reduced.¹⁸⁷ Research suggests that there are four types of capital—economic, cultural, social, and symbolic, although each type “can only exist in the interrelationship between social positions.”¹⁸⁸ Hierarchical power structures are produced when these types of capital are accumulated and exploited on behalf of the ingroup at the local and national levels, at the expense of similar accumulation and exploitation of capital by out-groups.¹⁸⁹ Typically, women as a group have lagged behind in the accumulation and exploitation of capital,¹⁹⁰ and the patterns of wealth and asset accumulation continue to paint a bleaker picture for women.¹⁹¹ Claims for a more profound redistribution of power and material wealth have historically generated resistance from powerful interests.¹⁹² Such resistance will likely intensify on the ground of gender.¹⁹³ In a context where cultural and economic forms of injustice reinforce each other, society will unavoidably degenerate into a vortex fed by a vicious cycle of pervasive structural injustices, given that “economic disadvantage impedes equal participation in the making of culture, in public spheres, and in everyday life.”¹⁹⁴

Instances such as these underscore the centrality of cultural contexts in the understanding of socio-political narratives and concepts.

185. See Stromquist, *supra* note 40, at 420.

186. DIV. FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN, UNITED NATIONS, 2009 WORLD SURVEY ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT: WOMEN'S CONTROL OVER ECONOMIC RESOURCES AND ACCESS TO FINANCIAL RESOURCES, INCLUDING MICROFINANCE v (2009).

187. Press Release, UN Women, UN Women Highlights Robust Measures to Enhance Women's Economic Empowerment (Oct. 5, 2011), *available at* <http://www.unwomen.org/2011/10/un-women-highlights-robust-measures-to-enhance-womens-economic-empowerment/>.

188. Egeland & Gressgård, *supra* note 117, at 213.

189. *Id.*

190. See Carmen Diana Deere & Cheryl R. Doss, *The Gender Asset Gap: What Do We Know and Why Does It Matter?*, 12 FEMINIST ECON. 1, 2–4 (2006).

191. *Id.* at 35.

192. Horton, *supra* note 67, at 174.

193. *Id.*

194. Ruth Lister, *A Politics of Recognition and Respect: Involving People with Experience of Poverty in Decision-Making that Affects Their Lives*, in THE POLITICS OF INCLUSION AND EMPOWERMENT: GENDER, CLASS AND CITIZENSHIP 116, 124 (John Andersen & Birte Siim eds., 2004) (citation omitted) (internal quotation marks omitted).

When cultural codes are internalized, self-regulation takes on the force to continue internalizing oppression through these psychological mechanisms simply through the fact that those who regulate their own behavior are less likely to view their suffering as a product of unjust political conditions.¹⁹⁵ Demonstrably, many of these “taken-for-granted” cultural codes have resulted in the silencing of women’s voices, even in the face of threats of violence or harm.¹⁹⁶

To that end, the real social impact produced by oppression through cultural codes cannot be overstated. “Culturally patterned expressions of fear, anxiety, disappointment, frustration, and . . . other strong emotions” may act to erode self-sufficiency and exacerbate vulnerability.¹⁹⁷ These threats have caused women everywhere to translate negative impacts of unequal distribution of resources as incompetence, ineptitude, and a personal failure¹⁹⁸ to live up to the alleged “[c]apitalist mythology . . . that promotes individual freedom, personal autonomy, and notions that persons that are poor . . . are lazy, undeserving, unintelligent and to blame for their own plight.”¹⁹⁹ Complex power configurations have also created a distorted perception of equity to the effect that women in some places such as the Caribbean and South Africa consider themselves equal to men in the public spheres, but inferior to them in the private spheres.²⁰⁰

It is in the face of these circumstances that individuals seeking empowerment must first gain a better awareness of the dynamics of oppression in their lives.²⁰¹ It has been shown that “individuals do not engage in emancipatory actions until they have gained considerable awareness of their own oppression.”²⁰²

E. Empowerment

Time and again, empowerment has been defined as a process of self-definition to create capacity for agency. Specifically in the case of empowerment of women, the journey towards self-definition carries with it important political significance.²⁰³ Empowerment imbues women not only with a sense of purpose in achieving specific political demands, but also with the “living . . . proof that women can do much

195. See Prilleltensky, *supra* note 165, at 127 (describing psychological oppression).

196. See Hassim, *supra* note 163, at 64.

197. See Phillips, *supra* note 121, at 490 (internal quotation marks omitted).

198. See Cahill, *supra* note 125, at 282.

199. Bernard, *supra* note 103, at 10.

200. *Id.* at 8; Hassim, *supra* note 163, at 61.

201. See Prilleltensky, *supra* note 165, at 128.

202. *Id.* (citation omitted).

203. See Takhar, *supra* note 167, at 129.

more than contemporary stereotypes and arrangements suggest.”²⁰⁴ In this respect, the language of empowerment steadily features concepts of self-definition and self-actualization to epitomize the freedom to explore and live in the space created by both men and women,²⁰⁵ or to bring about personal transformation and healing.²⁰⁶ The journey toward self-definition bears political significance when actors begin to challenge underlying assumptions of constructed realities, to identify methods to address structural inequalities, and to commit to instigate social change.²⁰⁷

A vital ingredient in the process of empowerment, therefore, concerns cognition. Inherent in the concept of empowerment is the rejection of the dimensions of personal, cultural, or institutional knowledge and the assumptions that perpetuate inequality. According to Collins:

This level of individual consciousness is a fundamental area where new knowledge can generate change. Traditional accounts assume that power as domination operates from the top down by forcing and controlling unwilling victims to bend to the will of more powerful superiors. But these accounts fail to account for questions concerning why, for example, women stay with abusive men even with ample opportunity to leave or why slaves did not kill their owners more often. . . . They also fail to account for sustained resistance by victims, even when chances for victory appear remote. . . . [T]he power of self-definition and the necessity of a free mind . . . speaks to the importance . . . place[d] on consciousness as a sphere of freedom.²⁰⁸

This epistemological premise maintains that “[b]ecoming personally empowered through self-knowledge, even within conditions that severely limit one’s ability to act, is essential.”²⁰⁹ This self-knowledge has the effect of changing the world from one in which a person merely exists to one over which that person has some control, and this change can be empowering.²¹⁰ Accounts from women activists lend credence to the importance of acquiring fresh perspectives as part and parcel of empowerment. To a woman activist in China, the opportunity to gain fresh perspectives and worldviews has led to an “incredible change in [her] way of thinking” and a maturity in analyzing the

204. Sutton, *supra* note 131, at 153.

205. See Bernard, *supra* note 103, at 15.

206. See Phillips, *supra* note 121, at 492.

207. See Cornwall, *supra* note 99.

208. 2 PATRICIA HILL COLLINS, *BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT: KNOWLEDGE, CONSCIOUSNESS, AND THE POLITICS OF EMPOWERMENT* 227 (1990).

209. COLLINS, *supra* note 127, at 118.

210. *Id.*

issues affecting her.²¹¹ Another woman activist in Poland described her personal transformation from being ignorant of the injustices that pervaded her society, to acknowledgment, and subsequently to her first encounter with feminist thinking through a book by U.S. feminist Kate Millet, which made her feel “like ‘a kid in a candy store.’”²¹²

In addition, self-confidence has further been identified as an enabler and a catalyst to facilitate the process of empowerment. In a project that involved interviewing over forty women activists from various countries around the world, McGuire, Stewart, and Curtin report that despite the diverse experiences of these women activists, one significant point of convergence was the extent that self-confidence had factored into their decisions and journeys towards becoming advocates for women’s issues.²¹³

Empowerment has also been linked to the relational aspect of collective empowerment, rallying individuals to come together to work for change.²¹⁴ Psychologists have sought to connect collective empowerment to the idea of personal and community wellness.²¹⁵ It is argued that “[w]hen collective factors such as social justice and access to valued resources combine with a sense of community and personal empowerment, chances are that wellness will ensue. When, on the other hand, injustice and exploitation blend with lack of resources, social fragmentation, and ill health, . . . oppression will emerge.”²¹⁶

F. Agency

“Agency” as a concept denotes “self-directed modes of action, and implies an empowered ability to influence ways of being.”²¹⁷ To the extent that political agency is understood as a broad and evolving capacity that can be exercised in both formal/public and informal/private spheres,²¹⁸ any initiative to shape the conditions of life could potentially be seen as an exercise of political agency and, as such, bear political implications. In this sense, agency has typically been associated with the exercise of choice,²¹⁹ although the enterprise of consuming knowledge has also been synonymously linked with acquiring agency.²²⁰

211. McGuire et al., *supra* note 144, at 106.

212. *Id.* at 119.

213. *Id.* (noting that one’s “self-image as an intellectually capable, reflective, idealistic person [is] decisive in shaping” one’s actions and situation).

214. Lister, *supra* note 194, at 127.

215. See Prilleltensky, *supra* note 165, at 124.

216. *Id.* (citations omitted).

217. Sander-Staudt, *supra* note 130, at 270.

218. *Id.* at 274.

219. *Id.* at 281, 283.

220. See Sankaran & Hoon, *supra* note 128, at 286.

Just as all “[p]references, choices and values are shaped by the economic and social conditions of the society and the groups we live in[,] [w]hat a [person] desires can [also] only be understood by the social context of internal and external factors.”²²¹ Cognition plays an equally important role to engender awareness, inform choices, and introduce alternatives to challenge dominant discourses that inhibit women’s capacity to exercise meaningful choices.

Nonetheless, agency requires a step above and beyond cognition—that of conviction. Conceivably, the factors that will instigate individuals to change include, among others, the cognitive perception of a viable alternative to the status quo or a perceived instability in the status of relations.²²² Most importantly, they “must have some confidence that social change is *possible*.”²²³ Although agency in this regard is viewed as initiating a series of acts towards adopting change, it has been stressed that a conscious decision to take a conscious action is itself indicative of agency, irrespective of the significance of the decision and action.²²⁴ Being an agent in this regard means that “you can take the constraints and possibilities that condition your life and make something of them in your own way.”²²⁵ This is consistent with the argument that every woman has a different starting point in the journey towards empowerment, and every incremental step is a step that she takes of her own volition.²²⁶

In this regard, one instance that has constantly been held to signify agency is the construction of an alternative reality where engagement with an imagined liberatory world features as a source of empowerment for women otherwise constrained by repressive structural inequalities.²²⁷ Ethnographic reports of such practices have drawn attention to how the construction of an alternative world can help develop new forms of consciousness,²²⁸ provide a space for women to engage in meaning-making, and negotiate the formation of new social and personal identities.²²⁹ To anthropologists Holland and

221. Pinar Uyan-Semerci, *Redistribution, Recognition and Participation: Incorporating Politics of Difference to the Capability Framework* 14 (2007) (unpublished paper), available at <http://www.capabilityapproach.com/pubs/Uyan07.pdf>.

222. Caroline Kelly & Sara Breinlinger, *Identity and Injustice: Exploring Women’s Participation in Collection Action*, 5 J. COMMUNITY & APPLIED SOC. PSYCHOL. 41, 43 (1995).

223. *Id.* at 44.

224. See Takhar, *supra* note 167, at 133.

225. Sander-Staudt, *supra* note 130, at 270 (quoting IRIS MARION YOUNG, *INCLUSION AND DEMOCRACY* 101 (2001)).

226. See Cornwall, *supra* note 99.

227. See, e.g., Holland & Skinner, *supra* note 107, at 854 (discussing the transformative power of festival songs in Nepalese women’s activism).

228. Takhar, *supra* note 167, at 132 (explaining that self-help groups can “uplift” women from a state of “internalized oppression” (internal quotations omitted)).

229. See Holland & Skinner, *supra* note 107, at 853.

Skinner, their participation in the Nepalese Tij festival, an annual event in which only women participated, was an eye-opener:

[W]e see empowerment through participants' engagement with an imagined liberatory world. In the Tij festivals, women produced and performed critical commentary in song verses, striving to capture feelings and sentiments about being female in Nepali Hindu society, and, in the process, they engaged in the *collective* making of a new cultural world. They created songs that objectified their position as women, made it a matter of collective re-evaluation and reflection, and gave it a collective emotional valence. The songs were not only tools of critique, but also, important tools of self-authoring and collective world making.²³⁰

It is important, however, to recognize that the exercise of such a collective form of agency is not without potential setbacks and challenges. In cases where women make use of their socially condoned roles to rally behind causes typically associated with the female domain, wider issues concerning structural inequalities will likely remain out of reach.²³¹ This was evident in Japan, where the unprecedented success of women-led campaigns on birth control and anti-nuclear proliferation issues has not been successfully replicated in other attempts to advocate for women's interests.²³² Purportedly, maternal concerns as the main rallying point in these two movements boosted their outcomes.²³³ Evidence further shows that these movements have the tendency to promote non-inclusivity, as in the case of the Tij in Nepal, which has increasingly sidelined uneducated women,²³⁴ or the case in Japan in which women who were not mothers were excluded from the movements.²³⁵ In more extreme cases, agency may also be manipulated for objectives that perpetuate communal hatred, as evidenced by the organization of Samiti women in India who propagate the idea that all Muslim men are violators of women.²³⁶

Basu amplifies this argument:

The relationships between agency, activism, and empowerment are complicated and often contradictory. Women's agency may strengthen systems of gender segregation, and women's activism

230. *Id.* at 855.

231. See Takeda, *supra* note 69, at 195–96 (“[T]he strategy of the social grouping itself does not solve the dilemma of equality/difference. Rather, it differentiates ‘women’s political space’ from mainstream institutional politics.”).

232. *Id.* at 194.

233. *Id.* at 193–94.

234. Holland & Skinner, *supra* note 107, at 856.

235. Takeda, *supra* note 69, at 195.

236. Ciotti, *supra* note 149, at 444.

may heighten identification with their roles as mothers. Women's activism may also empower women from particular communities but at the cost of deepening religious and ethnic divisions among them.²³⁷

The challenge lies in identifying approaches that will help channel self-actualization into meaningful and equitable agendas. In this respect, the development of a conceptual space to help women recognize and identify instances of power, oppression, empowerment, and agency should also include mechanisms and approaches to help them better understand and deal with their reactions, fears, and anxieties in relation to ubiquitous social issues. In harnessing women's political agency, great pains should be taken to help them develop expressive balancing skills that would enable them "to weigh moral concerns and to find a course of action that keeps these concerns in equilibrium. . . . [as well as] to assert their needs and represent their choices without rupturing relationships."²³⁸

G. Participation

Political participation has traditionally been regarded as one of the most significant areas of participation by women in the public sphere.²³⁹ Even with increased women representation in leadership capacity and the political arena on the whole,²⁴⁰ the question remains as to whether demanding greater representation of women within flawed and dysfunctional political orders will correct underlying structural inequalities in the political system. Historically, the demand for quantity representation rather than quality representation has in reality resulted in a gap between the elected elite leaders and the masses.²⁴¹ In countries with parity laws like France, women have been induced to run for elections solely to fill up the required quotas.²⁴² This has raised serious questions as to the credibility of elected women

237. Amrita Basu, *Appropriating Gender*, in *APPROPRIATING GENDER: WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND POLITICISED RELIGION IN SOUTH ASIA* 3, 10 (Patricia Jeffery & Amrita Basu eds., 1998).

238. Sander-Staudt, *supra* note 130, at 281.

239. See Theo-Ben Gurirab & Pia Cayetano, *Women in Politics: The Fight to End Violence Against Women*, 47 UN CHRON., 2010, at 33, 34, available at http://www.un.org/wcm/webdav/site/chronicle/shared/images/2010/issue1/UN%20Chronicle%20_1,%202010.pdf.

240. *Id.*

241. Hassim, *supra* note 163, at 72 (explaining this development in the context of South African leadership and politics).

242. Judith Warner, *Same Difference: France Goes Nuts for Parity*, NEW REPUBLIC, Mar. 26, 2001, at 16.

representatives, and has further sought to undermine those who are seriously committed to the office.²⁴³ In addition, many women leaders have been pressured to co-opt to party agendas, some of which conflict with the advancement of women's issues.²⁴⁴ Detractors who have refused co-option have been repeatedly sidelined and disenfranchised.²⁴⁵

It has thus become apparent that making political institutions more responsive and accountable is more than just getting more women into politics. In recent years, women advocates have called for the parameters of participation to be broadened to incorporate activities that are not normally associated with visible electoral politics.²⁴⁶ The contextualization of socio-political participation rooted in the experience of women, while broadening its analyses, therefore offers a focal response to societal norms that limit women's participation. In the words of Susinos, "some of the characteristics of hegemonic female subjectivity act in some cases as a first barrier for the participation of young women, to the extent that it continues to orient the personal paths and aspirations of the girls towards subordinate, secondary and dependent forms of existence in the world."²⁴⁷

H. Social Relationships

Lasting social change requires the participation of all stakeholders and the creation of an alternative reality that entails the participation of men, women, and children.²⁴⁸ In this respect, many civil society organizations have done important work in helping women develop the skills to understand and engage with various issues of gender relations and to "build allies within the traditional leaderships, amongst men, with their partners, etc."²⁴⁹ This affirms the need for all in society to be involved and engaged in the collaborative effort to reconfigure existing relationships towards more equitable and mutually empowering social relationships.

243. *Id.*

244. See, e.g., April J. Mayes, *Why Dominican Feminism Moved to the Right: Class, Colour and Women's Activism in the Dominican Republic, 1880s–1940s*, 20 GENDER & HIST. 349, 350 (2008) (depicting the negative consequences that occurred when feminists in the Dominican Republic refused to co-opt).

245. *Id.* ("Some activists . . . refused co-option and, as a result, were ultimately erased from official feminist memory.").

246. See Takhar, *supra* note 167, at 124.

247. Susinos et al., *supra* note 141, at 105.

248. Bernard, *supra* note 103, at 12 ("To transcend the internal and external limitations of patriarchy, men and women must consciously and collectively create new conditions.").

249. "Renewed Energy for Women's Empowerment": Interview with Head of UN Women in Southern Africa, AFR. RENEWAL, spec. ed., 2012, at 4, 4–5.

V. WALKING THE TALK IN EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

A. Rhetoric and Congruity

At the time of publication, the empowerment of women agenda had been earmarked as an important priority for U.N. Women's nascent mandate. Its Executive Director Michelle Bachelet, in her speech at the Women's Foreign Policy Group Luncheon in New York on April 28, 2011,²⁵⁰ affirmed that within the overarching agenda of women empowerment, economic empowerment, political participation, and leadership form part of the main focus in UN Women's first Strategic Plan.²⁵¹ Recognizing that "economic and political empowerment of women . . . go hand in hand,"²⁵² Bachelet believes that the achievement of both could only be possible if governments play an active role to level the playing field, increase women leadership positions, provide spaces for community and women groups to engage in policymaking and negotiations, and end discrimination and violence against women.²⁵³ The role UN Women hopes to play, according to Bachelet, is "to increase [its] presence on the ground" in order to provide resource support and facilitate capacity building of women's organizations, particularly in areas of conflict.²⁵⁴ According to Bachelet, plans have also been made to establish an international facility to accommodate on-call experts to "work with local women to facilitate their involvement in all official processes."²⁵⁵

UN Women was created in the wake of the failure of its predecessors to make any substantial progress in the empowerment of women due to "a lack of coherence and coordination, weak accountability mechanisms, inadequate financial resources and expertise," and a narrow programming mandate.²⁵⁶ To address the structural fragmentation of the previous gender equality architecture, management of UN Women has been designated to an Under-Secretary-General and the autonomous Executive Board that the Under-Secretary-General

250. See Michelle Bachelet, Exec. Dir., UN Women, Address at the Women's Foreign Policy Group Luncheon: Empowering Women Worldwide (Apr. 28, 2011), *available at* <http://www.unwomen.org/2011/04/empowering-women-worldwide>.

251. *Id.*

252. *Id.*

253. *See id.*

254. *Id.*

255. *Id.*

256. GEND. & DEV. NETWORK, UN WOMEN: A NEW OPPORTUNITY TO DELIVER FOR WOMEN: A GENDER & DEVELOPMENT NETWORK POLICY PAPER 3–4 (2010), *available at* <http://www.gadnetwork.org.uk/un-women-a-new-opportunity-to/>.

heads.²⁵⁷ Equipped now with a structure that allows it to present a coherent voice to governments and members of the international community, UN Women is ideally positioned to develop best practices, policy innovations, and support mechanisms. This goal is articulated in its Strategic Plan, where it is projected that reliance on “strong support from Headquarters and the regional level . . . [and] experiences of other entities of the UN system” would help elevate UN Women to become “a global broker of knowledge . . . [and a] hub/centre of knowledge and experience on gender equality and women’s empowerment.”²⁵⁸

In the past, limited in-country presence, authority, expertise, and budget have compelled the UN’s previous gender equality architecture to prioritize gender programming at the country level at the expense of specific needs of women and girls, particularly in areas such as women’s economic rights and political participation.²⁵⁹ To address this defect, UN Women has incorporated in its Strategic Plan the goal of “enhancing women’s representation . . . in all spheres of decision-making. . . from local to global level—as well as to support and monitor changes in women’s leadership and influence in other areas of civic, cultural and economic engagement.”²⁶⁰ UN Women’s declared objective to become an “effective, field-focused organization”²⁶¹ would in theory complement this goal, if not for the elaboration that institutionalization of field presence in this context apparently refers to the commitment of “resources to support country operations,”²⁶² the establishment of a “[m]odel of [s]upport at the country level,”²⁶³ and the coordination of the “space for partners to discuss and agree overall orientation of UN Women’s cooperation.”²⁶⁴

Without a doubt, to serve as a key repository and provider of knowledge would provide UN Women with valuable autonomy to direct a global shift in the thinking on women’s empowerment at the outset. It would allow UN Women to take the lead to foment a deeper understanding of the visible and less than visible constraints that permeate the realities of women’s lives, and to support the creation of environments that are conducive to women’s empowerment. Regrettably,

257. *Id.* at 6.

258. UN WOMEN, ELEMENTS OF THE UN WOMEN STRATEGIC PLAN 2011–2013, at 11 (2011), available at http://www.unwomen.org/eb_docs/2011/background-documents/elements-UNWomen-strategic-plan.pdf [hereinafter ELEMENTS OF UN WOMEN STRATEGIC PLAN].

259. *See id.* at 7–9.

260. *Id.* at 7–8.

261. *Id.* at 12.

262. *Id.*

263. *Id.*

264. ELEMENTS OF UN WOMEN STRATEGIC PLAN, *supra* note 258, at 13.

what seems to be missing from the Strategic Plan is an unambiguous articulation of a commitment to draw on the experience of local populations whose lives and realities are often disconnected from those at the leadership levels. Although it acknowledges that “[s]trong operational capacity at the country and regional levels” is essential to effective implementation of gender programming “at regional, country and community levels,”²⁶⁵ the extent that grassroots and community organizations are expected to contribute to enhancing women’s political participation in the scheme of the Strategic Plan has mostly been left out in official discourses. Where it has been mentioned, the details have arguably not been clearly explained.

As such, a clear majority of UN Women’s agenda for women’s political participation continues to be highly state-centric, the most demonstrative aspect being the provision that “[d]ifferent countries may set different targets in relation to women’s representation and participation—UN Women’s job is to help them achieve these.”²⁶⁶ Even then, it was still decided that there was no need for UN Women to plan for strategic presence in countries outside of its existing presence in “LDCs and middle income countries.”²⁶⁷ Within the ambit of the Strategic Plan, schemes for collaboration with states have therefore been confined mostly to developing minimum standards and services in response to violence against women,²⁶⁸ and mobilizing coordinated UN and multilateral agencies’ support to countries that prioritize women’s economic empowerment.²⁶⁹ In the face of overwhelming evidence that consistently shows the inability of the UN to engender effective grassroots participation,²⁷⁰ the decision of UN Women to delay building its field presence raises important questions on the extent to which it sees engagement with civil societies as crucial to the fulfillment of its mandate. Civil society organizations (CSOs), such as Gender and Development Network (GADN), have underscored their disappointment on this point:

Throughout the UN system engagement with CSOs is often reliant largely on the discretion of individuals and is therefore inconsistent and dependent upon ad hoc, informal initiatives. . . . Given this evidence, the UN’s recent commitment . . . to encourage UN Women to “continue the existing practice(s)” with regards to CSO participation seems to lack ambition. The establishment of

265. GEND. & DEV. NETWORK, *supra* note 256, at 10.

266. Bachelet, *supra* note 23.

267. *Id.*

268. See Bachelet, *supra* note 5.

269. Bachelet, *supra* note 23.

270. GEND. & DEV. NETWORK, *supra* note 256, at 13.

UN Women gives the opportunity to push from the outset for mandated, formalised and truly-participatory structures for civil society organisations—from the local and country levels, right up to full participation in the Executive Board. It is vital that UN Women is accountable, accessible and responsive to the needs, not just of the governments of the world, but of the women and girls of the world and the organisations that represent them.²⁷¹

As UN Women continues its rhetoric of recognizing civil society as “the interlocutor that brings the voices of women and girls to the table,”²⁷² it is perhaps worth asking what plans it has put in place to facilitate the development of “mechanisms for meaningful and constructive partnerships with civil society”²⁷³ in polities where it has limited field presence. It is time the UN recognizes the skills and expertise of women’s and community groups who have worked tirelessly for decades to break down barriers to women’s empowerment across the world. The establishment of UN Women has given these organizations renewed energy and strength, many of whom have called on others to join them to “bark more loudly at the lions—because [their] backs are covered by UN Women.”²⁷⁴ This demonstration of faith is not one that UN Women should take lightly. A fully mandated and formalized structure to ensure full participation of local community groups is consequently long overdue and as such should no longer be ignored.

B. Incorporating Lessons Learned

In her introductory statement at the Annual Session of UN Women Executive Board held in June 2011, Bachelet clarified that “UN Women will work in three ways: leading where [it has] a comparative advantage; partnering while other agencies lead; or providing advocacy support to the work of others.”²⁷⁵ According to Bachelet,

[i]n areas such as women peace and security or ending violence against women and girls, UN Women has a key role to play in bringing the system together to agree on and implement a system-wide strategy. In areas like HIV and AIDS, where a UN

271. *Id.* at 13–14.

272. Gloria L. Blackwell, *Bark Loudly at the Lion—U.N. Women Has Your Back*, AM. ASS’N U. WOMEN (Feb. 23, 2011), <http://blog-aauw.org/2011/02/23/bark-loudly-at-the-lion/> (quoting Michelle Bachelet, Exec. Dir., UN Women).

273. ELEMENTS OF UN WOMEN STRATEGIC PLAN, *supra* note 258, at 12.

274. Blackwell, *supra* note 272 (quoting Eleanor Nwadinobi of Nigeria).

275. Bachelet, *supra* note 23.

system-wide strategy already exists, UN Women will support existing agreements that define how different UN Agencies will work and will support the overall coordination mechanism to ensure coherence in the United Nations system response to the needs of national partners.²⁷⁶

Within this overarching orientation, it remains to be seen to what extent UN Women will be guided by lessons learned and research contributed by other actors in the field of women's empowerment. Data and analyses from country studies are valuable references that could help UN Women funnel its resources towards the approaches that have worked, conserve them in areas that have not, and stimulate deeper research on both spectrums. CARE, a humanitarian organization with sixty-five years of history in global poverty programs, offers a case in point. Spurred by a substantial number of projects that did not lead to long-term impact and results, CARE undertook a "transformative investigation" in 2005 to look at what worked and what did not for programs instituted in twenty-four countries to explore the underlying causes of women's disempowerment.²⁷⁷ The results from this four-year study engendered a programmatic shift where CARE now recognizes three critical areas that influence the extent to which a woman can fully realize her rights: "Women's own knowledge, skills and aspirations[;] [t]he environments and structures that influence or dictate the choices women can make[;] [and] [t]he relationships through which women negotiate their lives."²⁷⁸ Building upon the belief that progress in one area is usually insufficient to achieve empowerment, CARE has since sought to influence

[w]omen themselves: their skills, knowledge, confidence and aspirations[;] . . . [t]he societal and social structures within which women live, including but not limited to cultures, traditions, faiths and hierarchies based on social class, caste, ethnicity and gender[;] . . . [and] [t]he relationships through which women negotiate their lives, including those with husbands, children, siblings, parents, neighbours, and religious, government and other types of authority.²⁷⁹

The paradigm shift entailed a new understanding of empowerment, which CARE now sees as "encompass[ing] more than giving

276. *Id.*

277. CARE, *STRONG WOMEN, STRONG COMMUNITIES: CARE'S HOLISTIC APPROACH TO EMPOWERING WOMEN AND GIRLS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY* 7–8 (2010), available at <http://www.care.org/downloads/womens-empowerment-report-201005.pdf>.

278. *Id.* at iv.

279. *Id.* at 8.

a woman training or a loan, expecting her to do more or to do things differently. [It] also requires changes to the relationships and social structures that shape the lives women can hope to live.”²⁸⁰ The organization has since become a strong advocate for the idea that “empowerment is not only about changes in women, but about changes in the world that surrounds them.”²⁸¹ A testament to the effectiveness in the strategic overhaul, CARE programs in various countries, including Bangladesh, Vietnam, India, Nepal, Afghanistan, Egypt, Peru, El Salvador, Tanzania, Burundi, Sierra Leone, Kenya, etc., that have incorporated cultural contexts and local realities based on this framework have reportedly generated “shifts not only in individual attitudes and behaviours, but in their networks of relations and the structures surrounding them.”²⁸²

CONCLUSION

UN Women was created as part of a wider UN initiative to achieve system-wide coherence in the areas of development, humanitarian assistance, and the environment.²⁸³ Also known as “Delivering as [O]ne,” the initiative aims to address the fragmentation of the UN system to enable it to work more coherently with member countries towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.²⁸⁴ While acknowledging the achievements the initiative has produced, Bachelet laments the challenges to implementing the initiative, including procrastination, glacial progress, and ineffectiveness in reducing persisting gender inequality.²⁸⁵ For UN Women, remedying these deficiencies hinges in part on its leadership in the area of gender equality and the empowerment of women throughout a UN system that is “fractured, uncoordinated and at times even competing with itself.”²⁸⁶ It is arguably with this role in mind that Bachelet includes among UN Women’s three aspirations the goal to see “increased accountability for gender equality across

280. *Id.* at 12.

281. *Id.*

282. *Id.* at 35.

283. Michelle Bachelet, Exec. Dir., *Delivering as One for Women*, UN WOMEN (Nov. 18, 2011), <http://www.unwomen.org/2011/11/delivering-as-one-for-women> (describing Michelle Bachelet’s remarks at the Plenary Session on Sustainability of Delivering as One in the Framework of a New Modality for International Cooperation for Development).

284. United Nations General Assembly, Letter dated 9 November 2006 from the Co-Chairs of the High-Level Panel on United Nations System-Wide Coherence in the Areas of Development, Humanitarian Assistance and the Environment addressed to the Secretary-General, U.N. Doc. A/61/583 (Nov. 20, 2006).

285. Bachelet, *supra* note 283.

286. *Id.*

the UN system,” particularly in peace-building and budgeting.²⁸⁷ In addition to this objective, UN Women aspires to be “represented in the highest level decision-making bodies” in the UN and to have better access to “mobile, accessible, and high quality capacity and technical support.”²⁸⁸

It is rather disappointing that UN Women’s goal to work towards increased accountability for gender equality within the UN system is limited to the areas of peace-building and budgeting and, arguably, to a lesser extent, representation at the higher echelons of UN. For all the vociferous calls to make Delivering as One “more consistently about everything the UN does, from the Headquarters level to the field,”²⁸⁹ there is a conspicuous silence on what UN Women aims to do to directly address the persistent gender inequality within the UN system itself. Recurrent declarations that “including the other 50 per cent [sic] of the population on an equal footing is not only the right thing to do[,] . . . [but] the smart thing to do”²⁹⁰ and that “there is no better time to act than now”²⁹¹ have so far only bumped deafeningly against a wall of reality that continues to go unaddressed: “[a] quick look at UN practices in hiring, promotions, assignments, dispute settlement, compensation and high-level appointments suggests a clear and systematic pattern of bias against women.”²⁹² Statistics show that women account for four of thirty-three regional representatives of the Secretary-General, fifty-four percent of all UN system jobs, but only thirty percent of mid-level executives, and “less than one in four at the upper level under-secretary general and assistant secretary general posts.”²⁹³ Throughout the history of the UN, legal suits against UN officials for alleged gender discrimination and sexual harassments have been stymied by immunity laws, leaving claimants without any meaningful legal remedy, nor proper safeguards against retribution.²⁹⁴ Responding to this phenomenon, Steinberg points out that “[i]t is little wonder that issues related to women—e.g., ensuring seats at the table in UN-led peace

287. Bachelet, *supra* note 23.

288. *Id.*

289. Bachelet, *supra* note 283.

290. *Id.*

291. *Id.*

292. Donald Steinberg, *The United Nations and Women: Walking the Walk on Empowerment?*, INT’L CRISIS GROUP (May 27, 2010), <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/publication-type/commentary/steinberg-the-united-nations-and-women-walking-the-walk-on-empowerment.aspx>.

293. *Id.*

294. *United Nations Appeals Tribunal to Announce Judgment in Sex Discrimination Case*, EQUALITY NOW (Oct. 27, 2010), <http://www.equalitynow.org/united-nations-appeals-tribunal-announce-judgment-sex-discrimination-case>.

negotiations, eliminating sexual violence in conflict, or allocating post-conflict reconstruction aid to women's priorities—are given short-shrift in policy circles.”²⁹⁵

Like the rest of the world, the disproportionate representation of women in the UN represents an exclusion of “half [of] the [global] talent pool from contributing fully to the organization's mission”²⁹⁶ and would signify in equal force the “untapped natural resource” that UN Women has called on the world to start harnessing.²⁹⁷ It is nothing short of a stark pain to be confronted with how little has been done within the UN System itself in the midst of Bachelet's avowed campaign to improve the chances of finding real and lasting solutions to the challenges that confront the world by “making full use of half the world's intelligence—the intelligence of women.”²⁹⁸

The consistent pattern that emerges from UN Women's proclamations since its inception seems to rest on a lot of “what we intend to do”²⁹⁹ and very little of what philosophical, ethical, and conceptual premises influence our thinking and guide our actions. If UN Women is serious about eliminating global gender disparity, the failure to walk the talk by effecting changes within its own walls could only lead to an erosion of its institutional credibility. In every little corner of the world, the need to address prevalent structural inequalities at all times whether at home, at work, or in school is in itself an everyday responsibility that calls for sustained action, focus, and perseverance. Until the UN demonstrates a decisive commitment to translate rhetoric to action, and until UN Women takes the UN to task to restructure its own gender practices and policies, perhaps the work to advance women's empowerment and promote gender equality will remain a perpetual protracted paradox, and a never-ending uphill battle.

295. Steinberg, *supra* note 292.

296. *Id.*

297. Bachelet, *supra* note 283.

298. Press Release, UN Women, *supra* note 25.

299. Several of UN Women's publications and public statements exemplify the organization's general tendency to focus on goals and aspirations rather than philosophical premises. See ELEMENTS OF UN WOMEN STRATEGIC PLAN, *supra* note 258, at 1–2; Bachelet, *supra* note 283.