

# Gender, livelihoods and agency: tracking pathways of social change

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Professor Naila Kabeer

Departments of International Development and Gender Studies,  
London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

Objective of presentation:

Women's access to livelihood resources and opportunities, and its impact on their agency, appear to offer promising pathways of change, both in their own lives as well as in the societies in which they live.

The aim of my presentation is to draw on the empirical literature on this topic for what it can tell us about the pathways through which resources and opportunities translate into outcomes - immediate achievements and longer term change.

I have included some references on the last slide

## The importance of distinguishing between domains of change (Alkire et al, 2013)

- Change does not happen as a one-off event nor does it occur evenly across different domains of the lives of women and their families
- We are looking at processes of change whose short term effects may be strengthened or fade away over the long term
- The changes we see may be confined to specific aspects of life, those where they pose less challenge to structural inequalities. Can these changes open up possibilities for more transformative change further down the line?

The importance of distinguishing between different kinds of agency: what are their implications for structural inequalities (Kabeer, 2020)

**Capabilities:** expanding ways of ‘being and doing’ which women have reason to value

**Empowerment:** expanding ways of ‘being, doing, thinking, feeling, knowing’ that seek to question and challenge the gender inequalities of daily life

**Citizenship:** actively engaging in public and political life to promote gender/social injustice

Capabilities draw attention to women's increased capacity for achievements they have reason to value (emic perspectives).

- Large body of empirical findings to show that women's access to livelihood resources of various kinds (jobs, finance, transfers in cash and kind, land, education) frequently translate into investments in children's wellbeing – survival, health, education.
- Valued achievements from the viewpoint of women, children and society – but generally draws on forms of agency that do not challenge inequalities in the gender division of roles, responsibilities and labour within or beyond the family.
- Enhanced capabilities translate into empowerment when they are used to reduce gender inequalities in survival, health, education within the family (cf. impact of women's access to work and education on gender inequalities Dreze and Sen; Klasen and Wink; Afridi et al; Khandker)

Empowerment draws attention to increased capacity for forms of agency that begin to question patriarchal norms and practices - at cognitive and subjective level or translated into practice

- Empowerment processes likely to be 'path-dependent', shaped by local structures of patriarchy (mobility; son preference)
- Kinds of livelihoods matter: across three countries, formal employment systematically more empowering than informal, outside work generally more empowering than inside (Kabeer et al 2012)
- Change easier to negotiate within household domains than in wider community: communities often primary barrier in way of change (locality, approval) (Kabeer et al. 2012)
- Indicators of empowerment may reflect from 'customary' as well as 'contemporary' resources (Head et al. 2015)
- Interventions which combine cognitive change with livelihood resources more likely to achieve sustained change (Kabeer and Datta, 2020; Karimli et al 2021)
- Interventions which combine political awareness with livelihood resources more likely to achieve collective change (Kabeer, 2012; Sanyal, 2014)

Citizenship as status draws attention to existing rights (and deficits);  
citizenship as agency relates to struggles for gender justice

Political awareness rarely automatic for those in informal and precarious work – more often quantified for those in export factory jobs

But collectively organized livelihood efforts have been associated with increase in active citizenship: knowledge of rights, participation in public forums; willingness to mobilize for self and others (Kabeer, Millward and Sudarshan, 2013)

Networks of informal workers have helped to change national and global legislation (Domestic Workers Convention)

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