



Women's Empowerment and Agency: Bottom – up and Top - down.

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to explore the relationship between the concepts of women's empowerment and agency. Through a literature review, I will try to clarify the complexities of both and whether they are different or similar, whether women's empowerment may be conceived as an "expanded agency", or whether they may conflate into one notion. In the conclusion, by linking women's empowerment with agency, I attempt to produce a model able to take into account the specificities of particular women in a particular context rather than seeing women's empowerment as an abstract concept universally applicable.

Introduction

This paper aims to enrich the actual debate about the concept of women's empowerment promoted within the human development approach by linking it to the analytical concept of agency used in anthropology and sociology. The idea of such a connection came to me in the summer 2018, while conducting a fieldwork for an Italian NGO engaged in the development of a project dedicated to the empowerment of women in Palestine. During the survey undertaken to write a concept note submitted to the EU delegation of Jerusalem, I noticed contradictory notions in the literature concerning women's empowerment. I found the concept of empowerment used by NOGs and international agencies abstract and problematic, for its difficulties to relate to the actual life stories of Palestinian women in East Jerusalem. In order to solve these issues, I propose to try to link the concept of women's empowerment to the concept of agency. Therefore I will try to clarify the complexities the concepts of 'women's empowerment' and 'agency' have acquired and explore the relationship between the two, whether they are different or similar, whether the concept of empowerment may be conceived as an "expanded agency" or whether both concepts may conflate into one notion.

Women's Empowerment

The term empowerment does not have a clear and shared meaning. Many disciplines and domains

utilize it: psychology, economics, education, international cooperation, gender studies, studies on social movements or minorities, and so on. Because of this variety of uses, the debate around the meaning of the term is still open. Thus, trying to condense an accurate definition from a veritable ocean of literature makes the effort both a mastodontic task and a futile enterprise.

It is possible to say that the term has appeared in militant publications since the '60s. Anne-Emmanuèle Calvès (2009: 2) clarifies that “the many origins and sources of inspiration of the notion of empowerment can be traced back to such varied domains as feminism, Freudian psychology, theology, the Black Power movement, and Gandhism.” Since then the term has started to be used in those researches dealing with marginalized groups such as Africans Americans (Solomon 1976), people with disabilities, gays and lesbians as well as in voluntary associations and community organizations (Berger and Neuhaus 1977).

Among the many contributions, one of the foremost is the ‘conscientization approach’ developed by the Brazilian leftist/Christian socialist educationalist Paulo Freire for the first time in 1968 in his *Pedagogia do Oprimido (Pedagogy of the Oppressed 1970)*. While Freire included a detailed Marxist class analysis in his exploration of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, according to him, in every society, a small group of people dominates the rest of the population. This domination would arise a dominated consciousness in the dominated/colonized. He aimed at developing a critical consciousness that would allow the oppressed to obtain a tool to make choices and to become politically conscious. For Freire, “the role of the educator is not simply to transmit knowledge to the student, but to seek alongside him the means to transform the world that surrounds him” (Freire 1970: 9). Freire’s theory had an exceptional impact especially in the United States. Since then, social workers, as well as NGO and civil rights activists have universally adopted the word ‘empowerment’. However, only in the mid-80s, the term ‘empowerment’ became mainstream. Julian Rappaport (1984) initiated a first categorization of the term applied to psychology. He explained empowerment as “a process: the mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their lives” (Rappaport 1984). On the other hand, the publication of *Development, Crises, and Alternative Visions* by Sen and Grown (1987) represented a turning point in gender studies, and the “empowerment approach” applied to women’s issues has introduced new perspectives and methods. The number of publications by feminist researchers increased significantly during the ‘90s. Among them, Srilatha Batliwala (1993) defines empowerment “a process, and the results of a process, of transforming the relations of power between individuals and social groups.”

Latin American Magdalena León (1997), in turn, introduced the concept of empoderamiento, which became suddenly advocated by several feminist NGOs.

Jo Rowlands (1997), on the other hand, emphasized the dynamic nature of the term and warned about the inter-relation and interaction of different elements involved. According to her “performance indicators of empowerment need to be developed, of which qualitative indicators will be most significant. The methodology of the evaluation process is important, and women themselves must be actively involved in the negotiation of the criteria by which their empowerment will be evaluated; which could in itself enhance empowerment” (Rowlands 1997: 139).

Kabeer (2001: 437) conceptualized empowerment as “the expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them.”

The idea of women's empowerment in relation to development/underdevelopment emerged for the first time during the Beijing Conference in 1995 that was The United Nations Fourth Conference on Women. The previous three Conferences took place in Mexico City (1975), Copenhagen (1980), and Nairobi (1985), but that was the first time that the word empowerment became part of the UN speeches officially. As reported in the Beijing Declaration¹, the governments involved in the conference were "determined to advance the goals of equality, development and peace for all women everywhere in the interest of all humanity." Among the many commitments declared there were also "the empowerment and advancement of women."

After the Beijing Conference, the term empowerment achieved even greater diffusion, becoming part of the common language of development agencies all over the world. As said before, that was the first time that the term empowerment became part of the official documents of the UN. Despite this, it was not clear yet how to measure it effectively. One had to wait for the year 2000 to obtain measurement methods, when "the world leaders came together at the United Nations Headquarters in New York to adopt the United Nations Millennium Declaration, committing their nations to a new global partnership to reduce extreme poverty and setting out a series of time-bound targets - with a 2015 deadline - that have become known as the Millennium Development Goals."²

Even though the Millennium Development Goals are now outdated, it is important to mention them because for the first time the UN declared that progress in reducing poverty or promoting gender equality could be measured. The third MDG "promote gender equality and women's empowerment" have been replaced in the post-2015 Agenda by the fifth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG): "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls."

According to Esquivel and Sweetman (2016: 5), "Goal 5 is formulated on a strong gender analysis which understands gender inequality to possess economic, political and social aspects which are interconnected." Agenda 2030 is perceived by them "more useful to women's rights movements than the MDGs, because they reflect the input of civil society, including women's rights and feminist movements, in their formulation" (Esquivel and Sweetman 2016: 3).

According to Razavi (2016: 29) the gender-specific Goal 5, "recognises the fact that women's oppression is grounded in structural forces and institutions, both public and private [...] it is fair to say that most of the key strategic elements demanded by women's rights organisations have made it as targets under this goal."

Stuart and Woodroffe (2016:78) argue that "the level of advocacy around gender issues in the SDGs – and, in particular, around Goal 5, [...] suggests a greater emphasis on gender issues in public policy than 15 years ago when the MDGs were being formulated."

Naila Kabber (2016: 55) additionally highlights how the main principle of the SDGs, 'to leave no one behind', cannot be reached "without policies that ensure that the socially excluded among the poor, [...] are part of the transformation aimed at by the SDGs."

As suggested by Stuart and Woodroffe (2016: 74) "the concept of Leave No-one Behind also

1 (<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/beijingdeclaration.html>)

2 (<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/bkgd.shtml>)

has implications for the implementation of the targets under Goal 5, stressing the need to recognise the intersecting disadvantages that many women experience, and so acknowledging the specific barriers that must be addressed.” It is recognized that the problems faced by women do not derive only from gender inequality but also by the interconnections of more factors such as class, race, and ethnicity. Nevertheless, Valeria Esquivel (2016) emphasizes the fact that in the Agenda 2030, the word empowerment has acquired a *cautiously technical* meaning instead of an *explicitly political* one, and complains that when empowerment is used in a technical sense, “it becomes ‘empowerment without power’” (Esquivel, 2016: 18). She continues to say that the Agenda 2030 does not question existing power relations and the given economic system. For examples, women’s participation in politics “is not only dependent on women’s own effort [...] but also on access to the resources that act as preconditions for participation (money, time, confidence, and education among them), and on the existence of concrete mechanisms for promoting women’s participation” (Esquivel, 2016: 15).

Furthermore, from the economic viewpoint, Esquivel (2016: 17) argues that “the women’s economic empowerment agenda has not challenged embedded liberalism – or worse, that it has bought into it.” She explains how economic growth does not convert automatically into gender equality. Thus, she wonders: “if growth does not translate into gender equality, then, why do Agenda 2030’s commitments on women’s economic empowerment and its liberal aspects match so well?” (Esquivel, 2016: 17) Her answer is that: “Agenda 2030 combines progressive gender equality targets with targets on women’s economic empowerment which limit themselves to addressing liberal concerns in the existing profoundly unequal global economy” (Esquivel, 2016: 19). In so doing, Esquivel considers a limitation of the concept of empowerment, as expressed in the Agenda 2030, that of leaving unquestioned the economic-political structures, thus assuming an apolitical meaning.

Calvès continues to explain that:

For many authors, especially feminists, the word ‘empowerment’ has been ‘taken hostage’ by development agencies – whether multilateral, bilateral, or private – and stripped of its original emphasis on the notion of power. While the initial conception of empowerment concerns a complex and multifaceted process that focuses on the individual and collective dimensions of power, the term’s cooptation in mainstream development discourse has been accompanied by a more individualizing notion of power. (Calvès 2009:10)

In this regard, Kate Young (1993: 159) had already emphasized the collective dimension of the concept of women’s empowerment: “with the collective empowerment of women the direction and processes of development would also be shifted to respond to women’s needs and their vision. The collective empowerment of women of course, would bring with it the individual empowerment of women, but not only for individual advancement.”

Furthermore, while the initial definition of empowerment by the feminists of the Global South and the radical activists was a “multifaceted process of transformation from the bottom up” (Calvès 2009: 13), as soon as international development institutions absorbed the term in the so-called “empowerment approach” (Moser 1989), it “slowly became a vague and falsely consensual concept. It has come to assimilate power with individual and economic decision-making, has de-politicized collective power into something seemingly harmonious, and has been employed to legitimize existing top-down policies and programs” (Calvès 2009: 13). As Halfon (2007) highlights, talking about international development agencies, “women do not take power, it is given to them.”

According to Sardenberg (2012) the *liberal empowerment approach* considers women's empowerment as an instrument for development priorities, based on neoliberal ideals of individualism and competition. In so doing, the development perspective leaves the social relationship outside of the analysis, "it did not take into account the structures of patriarchal dominance that underlined inequalities between women and men, nor those structures of domination on the basis of class, race, ethnicity and other similar social determinants, which result in inequalities among women" (Sardenberg, 2012: 8).

It is worth mentioning a full passage where Mosedale explains how the mainstream concept of empowerment has lost its potential to challenge oppressive social relations, and highlights the shortcomings by many development agency in clearly define the concept of empowerment in their projects.

Given its enshrinement as a Millennium Development Goal, 'women's empowerment' can fairly be described as a central objective of international development. However, for some considerable time, there has been concern that in becoming mainstream, the concept has lost much of its radical potential to challenge and change oppressive social relations (Batliwala, 1994). Without a clear understanding of what is meant by empowerment "agencies run the risk of merely renaming top-down approaches as part of an empowerment policy" (Oxaal and Baden, 1997). Furthermore, while there is now a significant body of literature discussing how women's empowerment has been or might be conceptualised and evaluated (Longwe, 1991; Rowlands, 1997; Kabeer, 1999; March, Smyth and Mukhopadhyay, 1999; Moghadam and Senftova, 2005; Schuler, 2006; Moser, 2007) there are still major difficulties in so doing. Many projects and programmes that espouse the empowerment of women show little if any evidence of attempts even to define what this means in their own context let alone to assess whether and to what extent they have succeeded (Malhotra, Schuler and Boender, 2002). (Mosedale, 2014: 1115)

In this regard, Marc Zimmerman (2012: 43) indicates that: "empowerment is context and population specific. It takes on different forms for different people in different contexts." He theorizes empowerment as a way to connect "individual well-being with the larger social and political environment", and suggests that "people need opportunities to become active in community decision-making in order to improve their lives, organizations, and communities" (Zimmerman, 2012: 58). According to Perkins and Zimmerman (1995:43) empowerment is "both a value orientation for working in the community and a theoretical model for understanding the process and consequences of efforts to exert control and influence over decisions that affect one's life, organizational functioning and the quality of community life."

We can grasp easily why the construct of women's empowerment is basically flawed: it has no clear and unique definition. As a matter of fact, it is still difficult to refer to it unambiguously. As Md. Aminur Rahman (2013) provocatively writes: "this is easy to say but difficult to understand."

Agency overview

The concept of agency shares with the concept of empowerment a similar tendency to be used by different domains like philosophy, history, anthropology, political science, gender studies etc., thus acquiring different connotations, to such an extent that MacLeod (1992) talks about "complex and ambiguous agency." Given the huge amount of material, here more attention will be placed on

the meaning it acquired within the sociological and anthropological disciplines and on what Ortner (1989: 11; 1984: 1996) defined as practice theory: “a theory of the relationship between the structures of society and culture on the one hand and the nature of human action on the other.”

In general:

Agency refers to the thoughts and actions taken by people that express their individual power. The core challenge at the center of the field of sociology is understanding the relationship between structure and agency. Structure refers to the complex and interconnected set of social forces, relationships, institutions, and elements of social structure that work together to shape the thought, behavior, experiences, choices, and overall life courses of people. In contrast, agency is the power people have to think for themselves and act in ways that shape their experiences and life trajectories. (Cole 2019)

The term agency derives from the Medieval Latin word ‘agentia’ meaning “effective, powerful,” and emerged around the 1650s as a formal term representing “active operation” (Online Dictionary Etymology 2013). Some pioneers such as Marx, Weber or Durkheim have already noticed that individuals produce society but at the same time, they are produced by it.

Max Weber, was one of the first authors who initially indicated that “acts be distinguished from mere (animal) behaviour on the basis of acts being seen to entail a number of features of human rationality: consciousness, reflection, intention, purpose and meaning” (Rapport and Overing 2000: 1). For Weber human action is dictated by conscious choices. In contrast, Durkheim saw human action as dependent to “certain structures which implied constraint, even coercion, and which existed and endured over and above the actions of particular individuals, lending to individuals’ acts a certain social and cultural regularity” (Rapport & Overing 2000: 1). Durkheim conceives human action as a collective consciousness resulting from the embodiment of norms, beliefs and values intrinsic in a given society. Thus, the concept of agency emerged as an attempt to “resolve these differences, and explore the limits on individual capacities to act independently of structural constraints” (Rapport & Overing 2000: 1).

This fundamental issue reached a greater emphasis in contemporary social sciences focused on understanding the ways in which human actions are dialectically connected to the social structures in a form that make the two dimensions as reciprocally constitutive.

Talcott Parsons (1937), with his “voluntaristic theory of action,” perceived social structures as derived from human agency, thus interconnected with voluntary human action. According to Parsons:

A social system consists in a plurality of individual actors interacting with each other in a situation which has at least a physical or environmental aspect, actors who are motivated in terms of a tendency to the ‘optimization of gratification’ and whose relation to their situations, including each other, is defined and mediated in terms of a system of culturally structured and shared symbols. (Parson 1951: 5-6)

Berger and Luckmann (1966: 61) pose this issue into a famous syllogism in their *The Social Construction of Reality*: “Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social

product.” They tried to find a compromise between agency and structure, suggesting to pay more attention to the “social construction of reality”. According to them “the world of everyday life is not only taken for granted as reality by the ordinary members of society in the subjectively meaningful conduct of their lives. It is a world that originates in their thoughts and actions, and is maintained as real by these” (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 19). Thus, social structures forge the reality for human beings, which in turn act in a way to preserve those structures.

Subsequently, the Labourist politician Anthony Giddens (1979, 1984), the theoretician of Blair’s Third Way, has been recognized as one of the central authors in this debate and one of the founders of the practice theory. With his “structuration theory”, he attempted to overcome the duality between agency and structures, suggesting instead the duality of social structure. Social structure is seen as both the medium and the outcome of human agency, thus acquiring a bipolar nature.

For him, structures must be “regarded as rules and resources recursively implicated in social reproduction,” because structures are “institutionalized features [formed by relationships that are] stabilized across time and space” (Giddens 1984: xxxi). Essential to his structuration theory is the identification of the relationship between individual actions and social structures. Agency emerges as an “‘intervention’ in a potentially malleable object-world” (Giddens 1979: 56). However, his comprehension of this relationship does not question how social changes can occur. “When and how are changes by agency considered significant enough to change the structure?” (Lamsal 2012: 121). Giddens’ theory does not answer this question.

In anthropology, the concept of agency has been used in different ways, acquiring different meanings. For instance, Bateson (1987: 134) defines agency as “energy source.” According to him each agent possesses “an energy source [...] such that the energy used in his responses is not derived from the stimuli but from his own metabolic processes” (Bateson 1987: 134). In his definition, agency seems rooted in biology. Victor Turner (1969: 96), instead, interprets agency as grounded in *comunitas*: “a communion of equal individuals [submit] together to the general authority of ritual elders”, which is experienced in rites of passage. For Turner, “agency is rooted in a liminal period, where equal individuals change positions and, in so doing, strengthen the human bonds of society” (Kuate Defo 2013).

Beside Giddens, the most influential author of the practice theory is Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu’s agency is linked to the notion of habitus, term that he borrows and reinterprets from Marcell Mauss.

Bourdieu explains the notion of *habitus* in *The Logic of Practice* as:

Systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. Objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor. (Bourdieu 1990: 53)

According to him, a set of predisposed meanings, practices and thoughts are embodied by individuals, which in turn contribute to recreate and reproduce the existing social structures. Hence, people’s agency is strictly determined by their habitus precluding any assumptions of free will and

again avoiding to recognize how human actions may be able to change the structures. For an analytical shift in this direction, one can refer to the work of other exponents of the practice theory. According to Edmund Leach, for instance, agency is a manifestation of the criminality inherent in humankind. For Leach (1977: 19), “all of us are criminals born by instinct. All creativity [...] contains within it a deep-rooted hostility to the system as it is.” Here, “human action is thought to be rooted in a deep-seated desire to undermine established societal rules and conventions, so as to generate new ones” (Kuate Defo 2013).

To continue, Sahlins in his study of the Hawaiian society after the arrival of Captain Cook, exalts the transformation occurred after this cross-cultural contacts. He emphasized how a new dynamic situation called “structure of the conjuncture” (Sahlins 1981: 35), caused unpredicted outcomes. “By interweaving history and structure in this manner, Sahlins not only highlights the importance of agency and its often unintended consequences, he also emphasizes the temporality of agency and throws into question the concept of resistance as conscious activity” (Ahern 2001: 119). Nonetheless, given his structuralist roots, Sahlins’ work (as well as Bourdieu’s one) and his mechanistic “permanent dialectic of structure and practice” (Sahlins 1981: 54), leaves little room for the analysis of the intrinsic tensions inside the social structure itself.

Focusing on this issue, Ortner (1989) in *High Religion: A Cultural and Political History of Sherpa Buddhism*, deconstructs the mechanistic view of structures and agency. She highlights the internal structural contradictions inherent in the cultural and social order, suggests that agents are “loosely structured” (Ortner 1989: 198), and poses the problem of understanding how the actors are able to manipulate the structures that built them.

Several linguistic anthropologists explain how such “loose structuring” can be identified on both a sociocultural and a linguistic level. Authors such as Duranti (1994) or Ahern (2001) pay attention on how linguistic schemes can contribute to the debate on human agency. There is a huge body of literature within linguistic anthropology, which point out the similarity between cultures, and languages, both change over time despite they are supposed to reproduce themselves (DeGraff 1999, Lightfoot 1999, Sapir 1933 [1949], de Saussure 1986). Furthermore, “speakers of a given language are constrained to some degree by the grammatical structures of their particular language, but they are still capable of producing an infinite number of grammatically well-formed utterances within those constraints” (Ahern 2001: 120).

Authors as Latour (1993), Gell (1998) and Miller (2013) introduced the concept of agency in the study of material culture, as an attempt to demystify and transcend the dialectical opposition between subject and object. Miller, for example, through Marx’s concept of objectification and Painter’s (2002) one of accommodating, reflects on the role that material culture has in shaping immaterial cultures, and claims that even objects own agency.

Carol J. Greenhouse (2002) reformulates the classical notion of agency in the context of political crisis and dramatic change. In this kind of social fields where structures are not given, but most of the time are collapsed, opaque or are about to be rebuilt, she states:

The forms and expressions of agency are not determined by individuals on their own, if they are ‘determined’ at all, but rather by the perceived demands of the communicative orders in which they navigate—however fragmentary these orders might be under some circumstances.

Agency cannot be considered an analytically neutral term except to the extent that it serves as a reference to the entire problem of how people conceptualize, articulate, and enact their own ideas of relevance in relation to others. (Greenhouse 2002: 23)

She seems to agree with Judith Butler (1993:13), when she writes “agency is always and only a political prerogative [... (whose)] subject is never fully constituted, but is subjected and produced time and again.”

Also Ladislav Holy and Milan Stuchlik (1981: 16) declare:

The essence of the process of social life is that it is continuous. People did not create their society once and for all, for everybody else born afterwards to be born into a predetermined world. By learning the world into which they were born, and by continually thinking and acting in it [emphasis added], people continually create and change it.

Ahern (2001: 130) offers a provisional definition of agency as “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act”, nevertheless suggesting to scholars who intend to use the term to clearly define it for both themselves and their readers.

For anthropologists in particular, it is important to avoid treating agency as a synonym for free will or resistance. One fruitful direction for future research may be beginning to distinguish among types of agency—oppositional agency, complicit agency, agency of power, agency of intention, etc.—while also recognizing that multiple types are exercised in any given action. (Ahern 2001: 130)

Empowerment as expanded agency?

In very general terms, an agent is a being with the capacity to act, and ‘agency’ denotes the exercise or manifestation of this capacity. The philosophy of action provides us with a standard conception and a standard theory of action. The former construes action in terms of intentionality, the latter explains the intentionality of action in terms of causation by the agent’s mental states and events. From this, we obtain a standard conception and a standard theory of agency. There are alternative conceptions of agency, and it has been argued that the standard theory fails to capture agency (or distinctively human agency). (Schlosser 2019)

On the other hand, Casey (2010) remarks in his selected bibliography about the concept of agency in anthropology:

While debates about structure and agency have been a central concern in anthropology for decades, only in the past five years or so have anthropologists (particularly in the us) begun to question the philosophical assumptions that underlie academic interests in agency. The following texts take issue with the various ways in which agency has been used (both implicitly and explicitly) in anthropology and calls for greater attention to how specific ethnographic contexts may allow us to reformulate ideas about agency in new ways. While much of this theoretical turn has been inspired by scholars working in the anthropology of religion, fields ranging from science studies to Amazonian ethnography have also come to question conventional assumptions about

and uses of agency as a concept.

Agency is defined this way in a number of dictionaries:

- by the Merriam-Webster 1a : the office or function of an agent (see agent sense 4); b: the relationship between a principal and that person's agent; 2: the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power: operation; 3: a person or thing through which power is exerted or an end is achieved: instrumentality communicated through the agency of the ambassador; 4: an establishment engaged in doing business for another an advertising agency; 5: an administrative division (as of a government) the agency for consumer protection;
- by Collins English Dictionary (British English): 1. a business or other organization providing a specific service, an employment agency; 2. the place where an agent conducts business; 3. the business, duties, or functions of an agent; 4. action, power, or operation, the agency of fate; 5. intercession or mediation; 6. one of the administrative organizations of a government;
- by the Webster's New World College Dictionary, 4th Edition 2010 (American English): 1. active force; action; power; 2. that by which something is done; means; instrumentality; 3. the business of any person, firm, etc. empowered to act for another; 4. the business office or district of such a person, firm, etc.; 5. an administrative division of government with specific functions; 6. an organization that offers a particular kind of assistance, a social agency;
- by the Oxford English Dictionary (American English): 1. a. a business or organization providing a particular service on behalf of another business, person, or group, "an advertising agency". Synonyms: business, organization, company, firm, office, bureau, concern, service, branch, representative; 2. b. a department or body providing a specific service for a government or other organization, "the Environmental Protection Agency". 2. action or intervention producing a particular effect, "canals carved by the agency of running water". Synonyms: action, activity, effect, influence, force, power, work, means, vehicle, medium, instrument, mechanism, route, channel, mode, technique, expedient, intervention, intercession, involvement, mediation, arbitration, interposing, instrumentality, good offices, auspices, aegis;
- by the Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary, G. & C. Merriam, 1913: 1. The faculty of acting or of exerting power; the state of being in action; action; instrumentality. 2. The office of an agent, or factor; the relation between a principal and his agent; business of one intrusted with the concerns of another. 3. The place of business of an agent. Syn. -- Action; operation; efficiency; management.

The term agency has also been used within the capability approach ending up to be close to the concept of empowerment (Ibrahim and Alkire 2007; Narayan 2005; Sen 1985; Kabeer 2001; Malhotra 2003; Alsop et al 2006; Drydyk 2013).

According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, empowerment is 1. the act of giving somebody more control over their own life or the situation they are in, female/black/personal empowerment, the empowerment of the individual, see also black empowerment. 2. (formal) the act of giving somebody the power or authority to do something synonym authorization.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines empowerment as "the process of gaining freedom and power to do what you want or to control what happens to you."

Hence, basically, agency represents a tool, a mean, while empowerment is defined as a process. Yet

what is the relationship between agency and empowerment?

Alsop and others (2006) characterize empowerment as composed by two elements; the first of them is described as an expansion of agency. According to Kabeer:

It is important to clarify what is implied by 'empowerment' [...] One way of thinking about power is in terms of the ability to make choices. To be disempowered means to be denied choice, while empowerment refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability. In other words, empowerment entails change. [...] The concept of empowerment can be explored through three closely interrelated dimensions: agency, resources, and achievements. Agency represents the processes by which choices are made and put into effect. It is hence central to the concept of empowerment. Resources are the medium through which agency is exercised; and achievements refer to the outcomes of agency. (Kabeer 2005: 14)

Empowerment is a process of change, while agency is the process by which choices are made and put into effect. Agency is a dimension of empowerment conceptualized in another contribution by Kabeer (2001: 438) as “the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them.” She continues “resources are the medium through which agency is exercised” (Kabeer, 2005: 15). Resources and agency combined represent what Amartya Sen (1985) calls *capabilities*: “the potential that people have for living the lives they want, of achieving valued ways of being and doing” (Kabeer, 2001: 438). Regarding the achievements, they are the outcomes of *agency*. “In relation to empowerment, achievements have been considered in terms of both the agency exercised and its consequences” (Kabeer, 2005: 15). She makes the example of waged work: it could be considered as an achievement that improves the women’s lives and as evidence of progress in women’s empowerment. Kabeer highlights also the various forms that agency includes and how individual or collectivity perceive their *sense of agency*.

Agency is about more than observable actions; it also encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity, their sense of agency, or 'the power within'. While agency tends to be operationalized as 'decision-making' in the social science literature, it can take a number of other forms. It can take the form of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive process of reflection and analysis. It can be exercised by individual as well as by collectivities. (Kabeer 2001: 438)

Ibrahim, S. and Alkire, S. (2007) declare that agency and empowerment can be described and measured regard different domains of life, thus they are “domain-specific.” Furthermore, they propose a shortlist of comparable indicators of individual agency and empowerment, which includes: control over personal decisions, domain- specific autonomy, household decision making, and the ability to change aspects in one’s life at the individual and communal level.

Jay Drydyk (2010), in *How to Distinguish Empowerment from Agency*, examines the conceptual drift between empowerment and agency within the capability approach, and the tendency to assimilate the two concepts. He warns not to overlap them, explaining a first key difference: “agency refers to the degree to which a person is autonomously involved in their own activities and group activities in which they participate. This is a state of affairs” (Drydyk 2010: 13), while empowerment entails a process of change: “a process with a specific result: the process is one of engaging with power, and it is empowering to the degree that people’s agency is thereby engaged to expand their well-being freedom

in a durable way” (Drydyk 2010:13). Thus, empowerment does not lead to an expansion of agency, but it involves an “engagement of agency”. (Drydyk 2010: 13). He identifies a further difference: “‘agency’ is about what goes in to a person’s activity, while ‘empowerment’ is about what comes out” (2010: 13). He concludes: “the concept of empowerment, however, does refer to agency, even if the concept of agency does not reciprocate. [...] Empowerment entails agency, but the converse is not true, and so the concept of empowerment cannot be replaced by the concept of agency” (2010: 13).

Conclusion

The purpose of this article arises after a fieldwork experience for an Italian NGO and in particular from a research project dedicated to the development of a project on women’s empowerment.

It aimed to explore the concept of women’s empowerment inside the human development approach trying to link it with the analytical concept of agency in anthropology. Thus, I attempted to clarify the complexity of both empowerment and agency with a brief literature review in order to find out whether the terms are so similar that they can be absorbed into one concept or not.

Apparently empowerment does not have a clear and shared meaning, perhaps because it is adopted by many disciplines and various fields as psychology, economy, education, international cooperation, gender studies and so on, but above all by political activists from feminist movements to oppressed minorities. Basically, empowerment seems to have become a buzzword. In English, its synonyms are enabling, equipping, emancipation, enfranchising. In Spanish, when it is referred to women, workers or minorities one says atribución de poder o empoderamiento. In French it is translated with autonomisation, autorisation, capacitation. About minorities responsabilisation. German and Italian use the English word.

It would seem that, in the huge amount of definitions, attempting to condense them into a single one looks a difficult task and an exercise of futility, but actually it is not like that.

The feminist literature defines empowerment as a process of change: Batliwala (1993): “a process, and the results of a process, of transforming the relations of power between individuals and social groups”, and Kabeer (2005:13-14): “one way of thinking about power is in terms of the ability to make choices. [...] empowerment entails change.” In addition, the mainstream literature agrees on the concept of empowerment as a process, for instance, Rappaport (1984) defines it “a process: the mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their lives.”

If everyone agrees in seeing empowerment as a process, what drastically changes the point of view and makes the term political is the direction: indeed, if the point of view is that of international agencies, transnational and national NGOs, governments etc. who implement/s project top – down, the term empowerment becomes a paternalistic term. But, if the direction comes from feminist movements and political activists, it is bottom – up, hence empowerment is certainly democratic, if not subversive and revolutionary. It is not a case that Esquivel (2016) highlights the fact that in the Agenda 2030 the term empowerment has acquired a cautiously technical meaning instead of one explicitly political. On the other hand, Mosedale (2014) observes that even though the term implies a change in unequal power relations, donors and investors prefer an apolitical use of the term, in which power relations remain in effect entirely or virtually intact, collaborating in the process of

mystification of dominant interests. As Esquivel (2006:18) points out “when empowerment is used in a technical sense, it becomes ‘empowerment without power’”, which does not imply, as affirmed by Calvés (2009), “a multifaceted process of transformation from the bottom up.”

Also the concept of agency tends to be used as a buzzword in different disciplines and domains, and it is also untranslatable in Italian (agency (instrumentality) through or by the agency of → grazie a, per mezzo or per opera di) and French (= means) through the agency of, by the agency of → par l’entremise de, par l’action de agency). In Italian *agire*, *azione* and *agibilità* can be compared to agency, but the meaning is limited.

Judith Butler (1993:13) hits the mark when she writes “agency is always and only a political prerogative [...(whose)] subject is never fully constituted, but is subjected and produced time and again.” I agree with Drydyk (2010) when, exploring the tendency to assimilate the concept of agency and empowerment, he cautions not to overlap them, given that agency represents “a state of affairs” while empowerment implies “a process of change.” While empowerment “does not lead to an expansion of agency, [albeit it] entails agency, [...] the converse is not true, and so the concept of empowerment cannot be replaced by the concept of agency.”

Concluding with Kabeer (2005) “Agency represents the processes by which choices are made and put into effect.”

Examining the relationship between agency and empowerment, it is possible to say that the contrast between the two schools of thought within the debate about the concept of agency, from extremist structuralist to liberals, depends on the weight placed on the two poles of the relationship structures/agency. The former give the maximum weight to the social structures against the individual, while the latter admit the free will of the individual in the choices and in the empowerment process. This dichotomy affects also the concept of empowerment where the top – down approach conceives agency in a deterministic form, while the bottom – up one asks for subversive individual choices.

One cannot deny that it is important to change the structures of power from within in governments as well as national and international institutions, thanks to alliances with progressive officials (men and women). On the other hand, however, it is imperative that institutions and NGOs try to dominate the temptation to impose their project from the top – down and from outside, which despite the best intentions, risks to be ineffective, if not harmful, and do not address women’s actual needs as gender.

The terms empowerment and agency, as we have seen, neither have a clear, single definition, nor they are neutral and universally valid. Generally speaking, however, one can state that agency refers to a condition, a state of affairs while empowerment implies a process of change. Agency could be conceived as the starting point while empowerment can indicate the desired direction. The construct of empowerment has been criticized for its non-universal value, its marked ethnocentric dimension and for the insurmountable difficulty to be adopted by women belonging to different contexts. Given this limits, I believe that every research dealing with the concept of women’s empowerment:

- 1) must produce its own model able to take into account the historical contingencies, the geopolitical characteristic, the economic, socio-cultural and religious specificities of the context in which the research is located, but it should also recognize the class differences that exist within the general category of women. In order to overcome these shortcomings one could link the concept of

women's empowerment to the analytical concept of agency.

2) To some extent, recognizing the agency of a particular group of women in a delimited and specific context, how it is limited by the structures and how it can be expanded could produce a more useful model of empowerment based on an empirical dimension.

Thus, the proposal is to reverse the relationship by analyzing from time to time the meaning and the forms that the social actors give to their own agency in their peculiar social context, their *sense of agency*. After defining agency through the life stories and thoughts of the actors, the goal will be to perceive how their agency can be engaged in the process of empowerment from bottom – up.

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