The holistic approach to empowerment

In the holistic approach; empowerment is seen to be all those processes that make women take ownership of their own lives. The space for taking ownership, that is the space for women’s activity and agency, is limited by a number of factors: women’s own ideas of what is possible for them to do, laws regulating the scope of what women can do and socio-cultural norms of what women should or should not do.

Having a holistic approach when measuring empowerment means that one will look at increase of control or influence in different areas of a woman’s life such as family, network of friends, work, health etc. Measuring tools such as the “Circle of important areas” and the “House of Life” are based on this approach to empowerment and were tested with some success in particular in the Namibian study.

However, the holistic approach does not capture changes in the different core elements of empowerment, which are gender awareness; self esteem and self confidence; as well as agency and a sense of agency. These can be present not only on an individual level but also on a group level and to some extent also at the societal level. See the box on the next page for more details on this approach.

The pilot project researchers further agreed that empowerment is specific to a particular context and that each project needed to have its own definition in order to know what was to be measured. Also, the methods themselves were to be empowering to the women participating in the exercise, by way of reflecting back to them the increase in their self esteem and their sense of agency in important areas of their lives through their participation in the various projects. Seeing women as bearers of knowledge and acknowledging differences while generalising were further aspects that the researchers agreed to take into account.

Research findings

The study in Namibia focused on measuring the empowerment of a group of women who had completed the full programme offered by NNAWIB to women micro-entrepreneurs, which consists of Training in Group Dynamics, Business Management Training, Saving and Credit Scheme Induction Course, and Exposure and Exchange Programme. Qualitative measuring tools used were individual questionnaires and focus group discussions. The NNAWIB staff also completed a questionnaire on their assessment of their members’ empowerment. The group discussion focussed on the how the training programme had developed the women’s relationships as a group and how it had empowered them as individuals in important aspects of their lives.

One of the two quantitative measurement tools used was the “House of Life” Graph, on which participants indicated how much control or influence they felt they had in important areas of their lives before and after the training programme with NNAWIB. The other tool used was a scal-
Sharing the results

The project partners recently came together in Windhoek for a two-day working seminar to share their findings, provide a platform for further academic input on the issue of indicators for empowerment and strategise the way forward. Donor agencies were invited to share their perspectives on the need for a greater focus on the measurement of women’s empowerment in the projects they are funding. All participants of this pilot project agreed that it was an important exercise that should be followed up and shared more widely, and that international institutions and governments need the commitment, know-how, knowledge and expertise of NGOs in areas such as this in order to achieve what they are striving for.

Approaching empowerment as a set of elements

Core elements of empowerment are commonly seen to comprise gender awareness, self esteem and self confidence as well as agency. While gender awareness is essentially an individual trait it also exists on group and societal level. It can for example be seen in how groups of women motivate their actions and how they analyse their situation. E.g. “We came together as women because we are discriminated against” or “We demand safety on public transport because we have equal rights to freedom of movement.” As such it is also linked to self esteem on the group level – women feel that they as women have right to respect from others, legal rights, welfare etc. Gender awareness on the societal or community level is expressed through the extent to which public discourse uses gender as an analytical category and acknowledges that there are structures in society working to women’s disadvantage.

Self esteem and self confidence are easily understandable on the individual level. They can be illustrated on the group level as confidence in the group’s right to exist and in the sense of belonging – gaining strength from the shared sisterhood.

The working definition draws on Kabeer’s definition of agency as the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them, as well as the internal aspect, the sense of agency. Agency can be exercised by both individuals and groups or collectively. On the societal level the sense of agency is relevant in that the public discourse can acknowledge that women are agents and as such able to determine their own needs and participate in decision making.