

Why women's empowerment in Muslim contexts? Developing an interrogative and transformative research framework

Vivienne Wee and Farida Shaheed

Interrogating gendered power structures:
developing a transformative research framework
for women's empowerment in Muslim contexts
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Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts
gender, poverty and democratisation from the inside out

A research consortium



1. Southeast Asia Research Centre, City University of Hong Kong
2. Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre, Pakistan
3. Aga Khan University, Pakistan
4. Centre for Environment, Gender and Development, Singapore & HK
5. International Gender Studies Centre, Oxford University
6. Semarak Cerlang Nusa, Indonesia
7. Solidaritas Perempuan, Indonesia
8. Women Living Under Muslim Laws (70-country solidarity network)

Web site: <http://www.wemc.com.hk>
(or via <http://www.cityu.edu.hk/searc>)

◎ 4 nodal countries:

- Pakistan (all 4 provinces)
- Iran (at least 5 sites)
- Indonesia (at least seven sites in 6 provinces)
- China (Guangzhou, Henan, Gansu)

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◎ Cross-border component:

- Indonesian women in labour migration (Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, etc.)
- Afghan refugees to Iran and returnees
- Cross-border flow of empowering and disempowering forces



Why focus on Asia?

Almost half the world's Muslims live in Asia.

Among top 10 countries with Muslim populations

Indonesia	200 million	Largest
Pakistan	137 million	Second largest
Iran	64 million	Sixth largest
China	30 million	Tenth largest

Arabs = about 15% of the world's Muslims.

Diverse Muslim worlds – not all equally visible

Why women's empowerment in Muslim contexts?

1. Why women's empowerment?
2. Why Muslim contexts?

WEMC Research Framework:
applied to diverse research contexts –
comparative analysis of research questions

Why women's empowerment?

- Origins of the term: women's movements in Latin America & Asia (1970s - 80s)
- Mid-1980s: the term entered international debate on gender and development
- 2000: Millennium Development Goals – MDG3: Promote gender equality and empower women

Empowerment and rights

- ⦿ Rights = institutionally recognised opportunities
- ⦿ Empowerment = capacities
- ⦿ 'Rights may be recognised institutionally, but power imbalances often mean that actors are not able to actually claim them.'

(Cecilia Luttrell and Sitna Quiroz, 2007, Linkages between human rights-based approaches and empowerment)

Two foci in 'empowerment' discourses

- A. Focus on power: how those without power can gain more power so as to claim rights
- B. Focus on the attainment of selected targets as indicators of 'empowerment'

WEMC's position in 'empowerment' discourses

- ⦿ Focus on power (usage A)
- ⦿ 'Empowerment' = increased ability to question, challenge and transform unfavourable power relations
- ⦿ Women's empowerment:
 - NOT from a zero position
 - NOT from no power to more power

- ⦿ Power: NOT 'a kind of stuff that can be possessed by individuals in greater or lesser amounts'

(Young, Iris Marion. 1990. *Justice and the politics of difference*: 31)

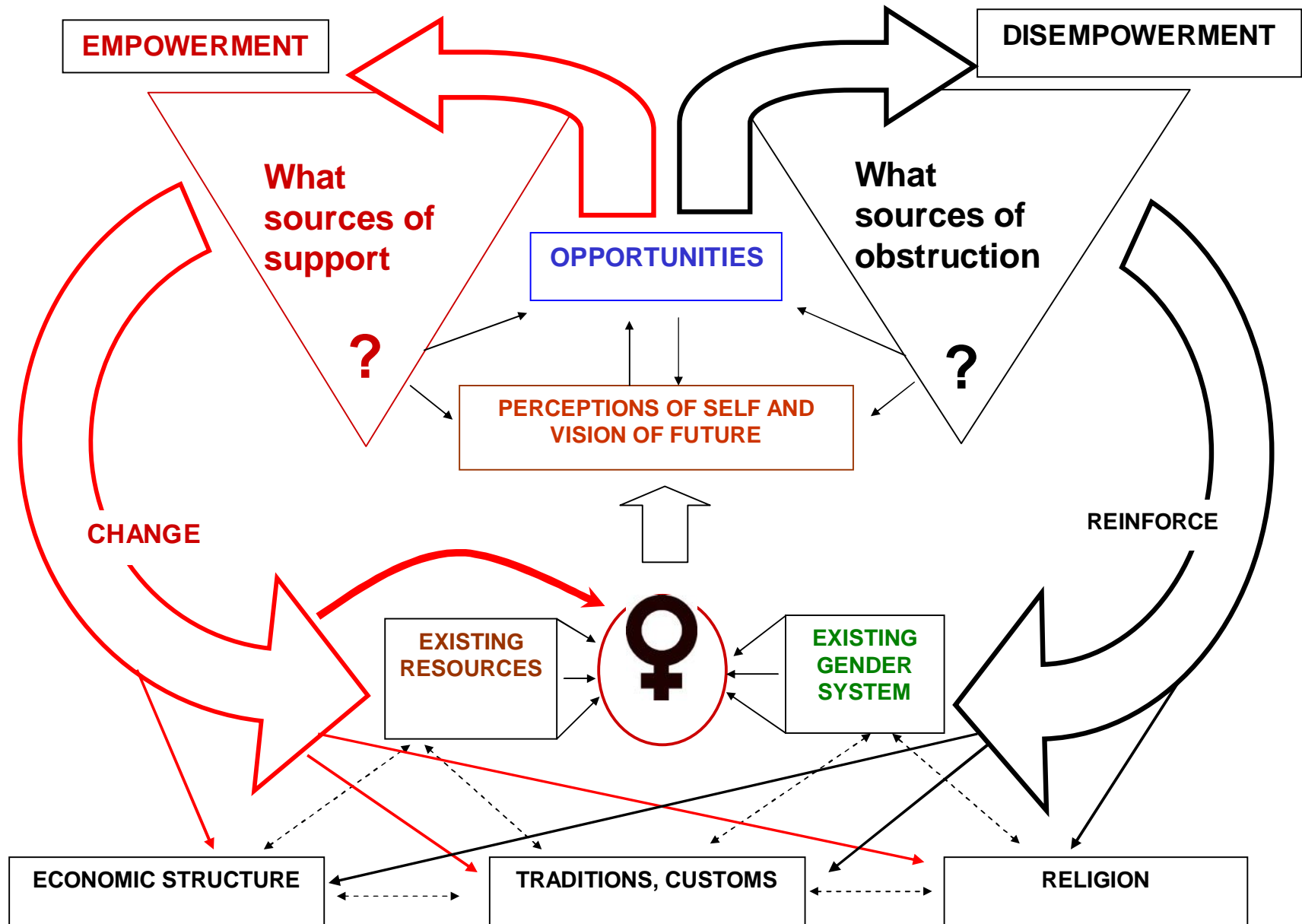
- ⦿ Misconception of power as quantifiable stuff underlies focus on targets & indicators.
E.g. Target for MDG3:

Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015

- 3.1 Ratios of girls to boys in primary, secondary and tertiary education
- 3.2 Share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector
- 3.3 Proportion of seats held by women in national parliament

- **Gender parity** in education: very worthy goal
- But underlying causes for **gender disparity**?
- Key reason: families prefer to invest in sons, rather than daughters
- Does girls' increased school enrolment automatically mean that gender equality is achieved in families?
 - No.
 - Symptoms vs. root causes

- ◎ Women – already located within disempowering power structures
- ◎ Empowerment:
 - Not accumulative process of acquiring skills & assets
 - But struggle from a position of disempowerment in interlocking power structures – economic, political, social and cultural dimensions



Core research questions in 4 thematic areas

1. Women's views and analyses of power, disempowerment, empowerment
2. Women engaging in contestations of power around mechanisms of control used by disempowering forces
3. Women's strategies for empowerment and the support they mobilise
4. Outcomes of women's initiatives for empowerment