

Longwe Framework for Gender Analysis

Also known as Women Empowerment Framework, it was developed by Sara Hlupekile Longwe of Zambia in 1995, this is one of the world's most persuasive gender theories. The framework is used to teach, plan, evaluate, learn and research gender issues. Longwe was awarded the 2003 Africa Prize for Leadership for her work in gender empowerment.



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The process of women's empowerment

Given the dimensions of a gender issue, and their obvious embeddedness within a patriarchal system, it becomes obvious that interventions on gender issues cannot be dictated by 'top-down' planners. On the contrary, women's advancement involves the process of empowerment, which we may give the preliminary definition of the process by which women achieve increased control over public decision making. Such empowerment is women's route to changing the practices and laws that discriminate against them, and achieving an equitable gender division of labour and allocation of resources.

The male domination of government is preserved by men for the purpose of serving male interests, where women are given most of the work, and men collect most of the rewards. Where men have a vested interest in the continued subordination of women, it would clearly be folly for women to expect male leaders to suddenly 'realise' the value of gender equality, and to 'give' women an equal share of the cake. Past experience already provides plenty of evidence that men do not 'give' power to women. It is axiomatic in gender politics, as in all politics, that power is never given; it has to be taken. Clearly, therefore, we need

to understand the process of empowerment. It is here suggested that this process of empowerment may be better understood in terms of the following five 'levels' of a 'Women's Empowerment Framework'.

The five levels of the women's empowerment framework

Welfare

Access

Conscientisation

Mobilisation

Control

Welfare is here defined as the lowest level at which a development intervention may hope to close a gender gap. By welfare we here mean an improvement in socio-economic status, such as improved nutritional status, shelter, or income. But if an intervention is confined to this welfare level, then we are here talking about women being given these benefits, rather than producing or acquiring such benefits for themselves. This is therefore the zero level of empowerment, where women are the passive recipients of benefits that are 'given' from on high.

Access is here defined as the first level of empowerment, since women improve their own status, relative to men, by their own work and organisation arising from increased access to resources. For example, women farmers may improve their production and general welfare by increased access to water, to land, to the market, to skills training, or to information. But were they 'given' information considered appropriate by 'higher authorities'. Or did they increase their own access? If the latter, then this suggests the beginning of a process of conscientisation – of recognising and analysing their own problems, and taking action to solve them.

Conscientisation is defined as the process by which women realise that their lack of status and welfare, relative to men, is not due to their own lack of ability, organisation or effort. It involves the realisation that women's relative lack of access to resources actually arises from the discriminatory practices and rules that give priority access and control to men. Conscientisation is therefore concerned with a collective urge to action to remove one or more of the discriminatory practices that impede women's access to resources. It is here that we see the potential for strategies of improved information and communication, as a means for enabling the process of conscientisation, but driven by women's own need to understand the underlying causes of their problems, and to identify strategies for action. Where many women accept patriarchal norms, the leadership of more liberated and activist women is essential at this essential phase of fomenting dissatisfaction with the established patriarchal

order.

Mobilisation is therefore the action level which complements conscientisation. Firstly it involves women's coming together for the recognition and analysis of problems, the identification of strategies to overcome discriminatory practices, and collective action to remove these practices. Here communication may not be merely concerned with the mobilisation of the group, but also to connect up with the larger women's movement, to learn from the successes of women's similar strategic action elsewhere, and to link up with the wider struggle. Here communication entails joining the global sisterhood in the struggle for equal rights for women. It is in this area of conscientisation and mobilisation that the issue of leadership become crucial. Here leadership entails taking the lead in building the mobilisation process, providing the organisational space, adapting and redirecting the existing women's organisations, and taking the lead in connecting with the wider sisterhood engaged in similar struggles.

Control is the level that is reached when women have taken action so that there is gender equality in decisions making over access to resources, so that women achieve direct control over their access to resources. They have taken what is rightly theirs, and no longer wait indefinitely to be 'given' resources merely at the discretion of men, or by the whim of patriarchal authority. Here the role of information and communication is to spread the word on the development of successful strategies. For example, in the widow's struggle to retain title to her property after the death of her husband, strategies developed by women in Zambia may be equally useful, or open to adaptation, in all the countries of Southern and Eastern Africa. (It may here be noted, in passing, that 'property grabbing', or discrimination against women in the accumulation of property through inheritance, is a major factor in their poverty and marginalisation in the Southern and East African region). Therefore these five levels are not really a linear progression, as written above, but rather circular: the achievement of women's increased control, leads into better access to resources, and therefore improved socio-economic status.

Conclusion

In rural development, this concept of women's empowerment is central to an understanding of their participation and mobilisation, which automatically brings with it the development of leadership for addressing and removing the many forms of gender discrimination which presently leave women oppressed and marginalized in many countries of the Third World. It is impossible for us to talk of 'women's participation in rural development' without facing up to the process of empowerment which enables and utilises this participation.