

Women's Empowerment in Brazil: Tensions in discourse and practice

CECILIA M.B.
SARDENBERG

ABSTRACT *Cecilia M. B. Sardenberg reflects upon the experience of NEIM – the Nucleus of Interdisciplinary Women's Studies of the Federal University of Bahia – in engaging with 'empowerment'. NEIM has been involved in 27 years of activism in order to bring about changes, both structural as well as in women's individual lives, towards insuring greater autonomy for women and our increasing participation in decision-making. She opens up questions about how to engage more directly and more openly with the concept of empowerment, and considering its theoretical underpinnings and their methodological as well as wider political implications.*

KEYWORDS *feminist; activist; collective; debates; women; transformation*

Introduction

In analysing notions of women's empowerment, it is important to recall that 'empowerment' has emerged from 'practice' into 'theory' (Aithal, 1999). That is to say, rather than developing out of a theoretical framework within the walls of academia and then being appropriated by activists and practitioners, it moved in the opposite direction. It was a concept coined by feminists directly involved in feminist activism and grassroots women's collective action taking place in the so-called 'Third World' (Batliwala, 1994; Aithal, 1999; Sardenberg, 2009).

This concept of empowerment followed two different courses: on the one hand, it took the route of academia, entering not only into feminist conceptualizations of 'power' (Allen, 2005), but also into many specialized fields (women's studies and gender, psychology, social service, etc.), developing specific connotations (Aithal, 1999). It was also appropriated by development discourse and practice, losing, in this route, much of its original radical connotations. As a result, it is now regarded with mistrust by feminist activists unfamiliar with its original meaning (Aithal, 1999; Sardenberg, 2009). In Brazil, empowerment has yet to be recognized as an object of feminist theory and research. It is widely regarded with scepticism by most feminists, even by those engaged in the very processes of promoting women's empowerment. Of course, this mistrust is not gratuitous.

Sardenberg: Discourses on Women's Empowerment in Brazil

Throughout Latin America, the term empowerment '... has been appropriated by mainstream agencies and organizations, as well as by national and local governments, to legitimize policies and practices that, from a feminist perspective, are far from being really empowering to women' (Sardenberg, 2009: 4). Nevertheless, I believe that it is time for Latin American feminists, to recognize the radical roots of the term and 're-empower' empowerment, re-appropriating it as a legitimate object of our theoretical and political concerns.

In order to explore the concept of empowerment in the Brazilian context, I look at the experience of NEIM – the Nucleus of Interdisciplinary Women's Studies of the Federal University of Bahia – in engaging with 'empowerment'. Ever since 1983, when NEIM was created, we have been involved in a range of activities directed to women's empowerment. Our activism is geared to facilitate women's collective activities in order to bring about changes, both structural and individual, towards greater autonomy for women and increasing participation in decision-making.

In the last five years – and more specifically, since joining the Pathways of Women's Empowerment Research Programme Consortium as a partner institution – we have begun to speak of our own work in terms of 'women's empowerment'. Through the Pathways Programme we began to engage more directly and openly with the concept of empowerment, dealing with its theoretical underpinnings and their methodological as well as wider political implications.

This has not been an easy transition for us. Moving from 'practice' into 'theory' (and research) has been marked by tension. In addition to dealing with the ambiguity of the term we have met with scepticism from our 'comrades' in academia and in the women's movement at large. We have received somewhat contradictory responses (even some hostile ones) from women in academia, government, grassroots movements, feminist NGOS not only in terms of their own conceptualizations of empowerment, but also in their reaction to our theorizing and engaging with it in our research activities.

Here I draw on the conversations we have held in the last years to look at how empowerment is conceptualized by different actors in women's movements in Brazil. I will draw, in particular, from the results of our 'talking about empowerment' in different circumstances over the last five years, and from data obtained from formal surveys as well as informal conversations carried out with friends and fellow feminists.¹

Why empowerment?

Despite our long engagement with feminist activism throughout the history of NEIM, our first attempts to conceptualize and engage with the notion of women's empowerment' was when we became active as 'practitioners' in the field of gender and development. This happened in 1998, when we undertook a regional gender in development programme for a state agency with IFAD support in Bahia involving women in rural areas (Sardenberg *et al.*, 1999; Sardenberg, 2000). We created women's groups and promoted gender awareness training to women community leaders and project personnel, elaborating special articles and training materials (Costa, 1999). We were inspired by the work of Magdalena León (1997) and her emphasis on collective empowerment as a strategy in the struggle against patriarchy.

The workshops that aimed to raise women's self-esteem were highly regarded by the project directors. Those dealing with issues of gender relations and women's collective empowerment, particularly combating domestic violence against women, were seen as interfering with local culture and 'meddling' in family affairs. Indeed, we were told that we should be doing 'gender, not feminism' (Sardenberg *et al.*, 1999). In time, despite arguing that our approach was in tune the way women's empowerment was outlined in the Beijing Platform for Action and thus with IFAD's perspectives on gender, we were asked to leave the project.

This experience was uppermost in our mind when we began our involvement in the Pathways RPC. Indeed some of our colleagues at NEIM were not sure about engaging again with gender and development projects, and even less sure about women's empowerment. We met with scepticism

when we began to organize our Scoping Seminar in 2006 (Sardenberg, forthcoming), which would bring together feminists activists and scholars from Latin America to reflect upon conceptualizations of empowerment in the region for the Pathways Project. Some colleagues were very reticent about accepting our invitation. 'Why empowerment?' one of them asked. 'Isn't this the stuff the World Bank works on?' she added, meaning that it was something that feminists should not be involved with. Others, despite involvement for years in activities promoting women's empowerment, declined the invitation declaring that they knew little about empowerment, had never worked with it, and did not see how they could help us.

Nevertheless, in that Seminar, following the opening presentation on conceptualizations of empowerment in a feminist perspective (Sardenberg, forthcoming), several of the speakers, despite manifesting their lack of familiarity with the concept, confessed that they probably had been dealing with empowerment all along. Marlene Libardone, director of AGENDE, a well known feminist NGO from Brasília commented:

'I would like to begin my talk by re-affirming and repeating Cristina's [Buarque] words. I also arrived here very concerned with my talk and with how I could contribute to this discussion and to the project. (But) I was provoked, first by Cecilia's talk about empowerment, which has much to do with the process of advocacy that I will discuss here' (Libardone in Sardenberg, forthcoming).

Others, such as Louisa Bairos (currently Secretary for the Promotion of Gender and Racial Equality of the State of Bahia), invited to speak on issues regarding the empowerment of Black women in Brazil, expressed their concern, not only as to their little familiarity with the term, but also with its impreciseness:

To tell you the truth, I was preparing myself to begin asking questions to the people who preceded me. And this attention to their presentations comes as a result of the difficulties I encountered in having to think of this topic from the perspective of black women. I know that other people arrived here with the same problem. That is why I feel tranquillity in

revealing this to you. Actually, this word '*empoderamento*' has entered very little in my vocabulary. And when it comes in, I now notice, thinking in terms of this seminar, I realize that its significance seems given, right? That is to say, this word comes as if, let's say, it was self-explanatory. This is a risk for any word that we want to transform in a concept, right Professor (Cecilia)? This is a risk for any word that is to be transformed in a concept that could actually acquire an explanatory capacity. It seems that anyone may think that, with his/her own head, he/she can work with it in the way that they please. In any event, without fighting much against this first realization, empowerment, for women, deals with the possibility of we, as women, to act with autonomy not only with our everyday activities, but also with our participation in power structures that are instituted in society. In any one of these cases, I see empowerment as something that derives from political collective actions. That is to say, with actions taken with the intention of redefining women's place in this system of gender and racial relations as we know it (Bairros in Sardenberg, forthcoming).

Which empowerment?

My own concern in using 'empowerment' in our work in Brazil – particularly in light of the mistrust that arises among feminists – prompted me to write an article in order to distinguish 'liberal empowerment' and 'liberating' in order to clarify where we stood.

I argue that it is possible to distinguish two basic approaches in conceptualizing women's empowerment. The first, which I will identify as the 'liberal empowerment' approach, regards women's empowerment as an instrument for development priorities, be they eradicating poverty or building democracy. Consistent with liberal ideals, the focus is on individual growth, but in an atomistic perspective, that is, on the notion of the rational action of social actors based on individual interests (Romano, 2002). It is an approach that de-politicizes the process of empowerment by taking power out of the equation. Instead, the focus is on technical and instrumental aspects that can supposedly be 'taught' in special training courses, for example.

In contrast, in the other approach – which I will call 'liberating empowerment' – power relations are the central issue. Women's empowerment is

Sardenberg: Discourses on Women's Empowerment in Brazil

regarded as both on 'intrinsic grounds' (Kabeer, 1999), as the process by which women attain autonomy and self-determination, as well as an instrument for the eradication of patriarchy, a means and an end in itself. Thus, although feminists also aspire to end poverty, wars, and build democratic states, in this feminist perspective the major objective of women's empowerment is to question, destabilize and, eventually, transform the gender order of patriarchal domination. Such an approach is consistent with a focus on women's organizing, on collective action, though not disregarding the importance of the empowerment of women at a personal level. (Sardenberg, 2008: 18–19)

Despite the absence of the term empowerment in Latin American feminist discourse and in spite of a certain 'discomfort and enduring mistrust in feminist circles' of the discourse of women's empowerment, 'liberating empowerment' has been at work in the region since at least the late 1970s, when the first 'action and reflection' women's groups were created. Indeed, building on a feminist critique of Freire's 'pedagogy of the oppressed', and negotiating coalitions among different movements, several of these groups developed into organizations that have promoted special programmes geared to creating the conditions for the empowerment of women of all different standings and regions (Thayer, 2000).

However, approaches to women's empowerment in Brazil cannot be easily placed in one or other of those two 'bins'. Indeed, the *discourse* on women's empowerment in Brazil is more complex. It is characterized by a 'hodge-podge' or 'syncretism' of different notions of empowerment, which originate in the liberal and liberating perspectives of empowerment, and onto which there are other 'local understandings' of the term.

Empowerment in the perspective of women in grassroots movements

In Bahia, for example, particularly among women active in grassroots movements and those of the so-called 'popular classes', the notion of 'women's empowerment' is associated with the local understanding of *poderosas*, that is, as

'powerful' women or women 'with power', which in turn may also include the notion of the *mulher batalhadora* – the struggling woman – and well as that of the *destemida* – the fearless woman. These terms are often applied to women who fight against all odds and succeed, women who have interior strength or the *power within* (Mosedale, 2005):

I think that this thing of women's empowerment has to do with the *mulher batalhadora*, that woman who has the strength to fight. Like my mother who raised five children working as a laundress, and all of us with a diploma.' (Maria a grassroots activist)

Notions of *power with* (Mosedale, 2005), or the empowerment that comes from fighting together, are also evident to women engaged in these movements, as the two women below, interviewed in Recife, declared:

For me empowerment is the ability of people to strengthen themselves, for people to get together. For me empowerment is this, for all women to get together, not only in Brazil but in the whole world. For us to see the similarities between us in this suffering that we have. Because we have many different classes, right, and everyone thinks differently but we have to get together because at the end of the day we are women. We have to think alike and help one another. (Sereni)

Empowerment for me is about strength, about gaining self confidence, about me to feel safe. It is about being able to spread what I have learnt to other women and encourage and inspire them. This struggle that we are in, that I started with the rural women, with the rural trade union, today we are working on issues of gender and violence against women, in these spaces, as much the public space as that of organizations, we see this, people are empowered, people are strengthened and they bring all this knowledge to other women. (Ana)

The notion of empowerment as 'autonomy', also finds its way into this testimony:

I believe the empowerment of women is about autonomy, for the woman to have power over the decisions she needs to make and not to let *machismo* take over. So for example at home, when I was invited to come to this seminar, my husband asked me if I had asked permission to go and I said no, it is not like you are my dad, I don't need to ask, I am informing that I am going. (Lucia)

Empowerment in the perspective of practitioners and femocrats

Positive notions of 'empowerment' are commonly expressed by those involved in governmental machinery for women's rights, as they incorporate United Nations system parlance. As a government official taking part in the Commission on the Status of Women – CSW meetings at the UN declared: 'Here at the UN we always speak of gender equity with women's empowerment'. But when asked what she understood by 'empowerment', she confessed that she found it imprecise. 'I think it has to do more with social and economic development of women', she added.

It is also interesting to observe that practitioners and femocrats tend to think of women's empowerment more in terms of *power to* (Mosedale, 2005), or enabling power (Hartsock, 1987), the 'ability to transform oneself, others and the world' (Allen, 1999: 18). This notion of empowerment is clearly expressed in the following testimony from a femocrat:

Empowerment, which is a word that we use so much today, is about giving power to women to be in power. Not only political power but power of making decisions over one's life and not to allow themselves to be fooled by others. To have the power to question and to claim their rights and to vote for what they want, even to have the possibility to be a political candidate and become a representative for her region. (anonymous femocrat, Recife)

This notion of empowerment – of transformative power – informs the use made of it by Cristina Buarque, the current Secretary for Women's Policies of the State of Pernambuco and a long time feminist activist:

For me empowerment is the ability to create a new situation, a new condition, a new act, a new story for women in society. This gives us power. When we are able to create something new from ourselves, from us women, that for me is empowerment. Before our stories were referenced from the 'other', from 'him', the 'powerful', because 'he' was the one who has the power to create stories, he was visible in society. So for me, this is empowerment. (Cristina)

236 Not all feminists in government take such a positive view of the term empowerment. One

feminist holding a high government position (who asked to remain anonymous), confided:

I try to avoid using this term as much as I can. First, because it is an Anglicism, the term does not exist in Portuguese, despite its wide usage. And, second, because I find the term too much identified with development agencies, particularly the World Bank. And I do not agree with the World Bank's views on anything!

The mistrust of feminist activists towards 'empowerment'

Even when aware that the coinage of the term 'empowerment' may have other origins rather than 'neo-liberal' ones, feminists in Latin America, as a rule, treat it with caution, by qualifying and delimiting the term:

The first time that I saw the word 'empowerment', was at the UN Conference in the 90's. [...] We had a project to participate in all the UN Conferences [...]. My first time of being part of this was in '92 when we prepared the conference here in Brazil. In preparation we went to Miami to prepare together with 3000 women from around the world. It was the first time that I heard the term Empowerment this was in 1990. Since I spoke English I tried immediately to translate it, I couldn't find a word in Portuguese, nobody used the word 'empoderamento' here. During this time I was also asking myself, what does it mean for a woman, 'empowerment'? And with time, I can only see women's empowerment as something collective, the collective empowerment of these women, reaching their goals, the goal of our struggle. So, I don't believe in the idea of individual empowerment. That is not empowerment, it is a very neoliberal vision of what empowerment is and that is very different from my idea, my vision of empowerment. My vision incorporates ideas of social justice, socialism, a collective consciousness. For me empowerment is the moment women start collectively to make their goals and objectives known in an effort to change reality for women. Feminism is about making changes, radical changes turning the *status quo* upside down. (feminist activist)

Betânia Avila, the director of Instituto SOS, a leading early NGO in Brazil, expressed similar views, when speaking of the need for debates:

About the concept of empowerment, the first thing I could say is that I personally haven't worked with this

concept, hence I don't really have much reflection around it. I think that the way that this concept was disseminated, it was very focused on individual empowerment, maybe not really individual as such but an empowerment that doesn't challenge social relations. In a way it is a discourse that is not really based in real transformation, but I do think that there are people that speak of empowerment that way because like all concepts there is a lot of dispute around it.

Other feminist NGOs openly state their total dislike for the term and see those who work with it as being 'co-opted' by development agencies. One went as far as suggesting that we might end up being 'discredited' for working with a project about empowerment. 'Who is financing you?' she asked. She views empowerment as *power over*, that is, as 'domination', in this case, of the agency over our better judgements.

Note

- 1 I would like to thank Andrea Cornwall for sharing with me interviews that she conducted with feminist activists on empowerment, a number of which I draw upon in this article.

References

- Aithal, Vathsala (1999) 'Empowerment and Global Action for Women: Theory and practice', Working Papers, Kvinnforsk, University of Tromsø, available at <http://pdfind.com/empowerment-and-global-action-of-women/>.
- Allen, Amy (1999) *The Power of Feminist Theory, Domination, Resistance, Solidarity*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Allen, Amy (2005) 'Feminist Perspectives on Power', in Edward N. Zalta (ed.) *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 edition), <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries>.
- Batliwala, Srilatha (1994) 'The Meaning of Women's Empowerment: New concepts from action', in Gita Sen, Adrienne Germain and Lincoln C. Chen (eds.) *Population Policies Reconsidered: Health, empowerment and rights*, Boston: Harvard University Press.
- Costa, Ana Alice (1999) 'Gênero, Poder e Empoderamento das Mulheres', Available in: <http://www.agende.org.br/docs/file/dados.pesquisas/feminismo/empoderamento%20-%20Ana%20Alice.pdf>.
- Hartsock, Nancy (1987) 'Foucault on Power: A theory for women?', in Monique Leijenaar, Kathy Davis, Jantine Oldersma, Claudine Helleman and Dini Vos (eds.) *The Gender of Power: A symposium*, Leiden: Kartens B.
- Kabeer, Naila (1999) 'Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment', *Development and Change* 30(3): 435–64.
- León, Magdalena (ed.) (1997) *Poder y Empoderamiento de las Mujeres [Power and Women's Empowerment]*, Bogotá: Coedición del Tercer Mundo Editores, Fondo de Documentación Mujer Y Genero de la Universidad Nacional de Colombia.
- Mosedale, Sarah (2005) 'Policy Arena. Assessing Women's Empowerment: Towards a conceptual framework', *Journal of International Development* 17: 243–57.
- Romano, Jorge O (2002) 'Empoderamento: Recuperando a Questão do Poder no Combate à Pobreza [Empowerment: Recovering the Issue of Power in Combating Poverty]', in Jorge O. Romano and Marta Antunes (orgs.) *Empoderamento e Direitos no Combate à Pobreza [Empowerment and Rights in the Combat Against Poverty]*, Rio de Janeiro: ActionAid.
- Sardenberg, Cecilia M.B (ed.) (forthcoming) *Trilhas do Empoderamento de Mulheres. Perspectivas da América Latina*, Salvador, Bahia: NEIM/UFBA: Pathways of Women's Empowerment.
- Sardenberg, Cecilia M.B (2000) 'Introducing Gender Sensitizing to Elementary School Teachers in Rural Bahia, Brazil', in Parto Theherani-Kröner, Mathilde Schmitt and Uta Hoffmann-Altman (eds.) *Knowledge, Education and Extension for Women in Rural Areas*, Berlin: Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, pp. 46–54.

Some final words

I have purposely avoided writing a 'conclusion' to this article, as our work in the Pathways of Women's Empowerment Programme is far from over and new developments will certainly evolve. I transcribe here, as my final comments, the observations offered by Betânia Avila regarding the need for more open debate over the term:

I think that it is really important to have a debate especially because it is a concept that is so widely disseminated and I believe that us feminist have a big task in facing this discussion. Like all concepts that are disseminated around the world like that, there is going to be great dispute around its meaning so I don't see why we don't establish a debate around the meaning of this word (...).

Let us open the debate!

Development 53(2): Local/Global Encounters

- Sardenberg, Cecilia M.B (2008) 'Liberal vs Liberating Empowerment: A Latin American feminist perspective in conceptualizing women's empowerment', *IDS Bulletin* 39(6): 18–27 December 2008 © Institute of Development Studies.
- Sardenberg, Cecilia M.B (2009) 'Liberal vs Liberating Empowerment: Conceptualising women's empowerment from a Latin American feminist perspective', Pathways Working Papers 7. Brighton, UK: Pathways of Women's Empowerment: Institute of Development Studies.
- Sardenberg, Cecilia M.B., Ana Alice Costa and Elizete Passos (1999) 'Rural Development in Brazil: Are we practising feminism or gender?' *Gender and Development* 7(3): 28–38.
- Thayer, Millie (2000) 'Traveling Feminisms: From embodied women to gendered citizenship', in Michael Burawoy, Joseph A. Blum, Sheba George, Zsuzsa Gille, Teresa Gowan, Lynne Haney, Maren Klawiter, Steve H. Lopez, Sean O'Riain and Millie Thayer (eds) *Global Ethnography: Forces, connections, and imaginations in a postmodern world*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

AUTHOR COPY