

Beyond Autonomy Fetishism: Affiliation with Autonomy in Women's Empowerment

SERENE KHADER

Brooklyn College, City University of New York, New York City, USA

ABSTRACT *A growing critical literature on women's empowerment argues that the current focus on autonomy obscures the extent to which relationships, social norms, and structures shape women's lives. I begin from the idea that disaggregating forms of autonomy and conceptually clarifying their relationship to empowerment can help us respond to the critiques without abandoning what is genuinely important about autonomy. I argue that one form of personal autonomy, thin relational autonomy, is necessary but insufficient for women's empowerment. Seeing this can help us respond to the critiques as well as develop a better understanding of what should be prioritized in development interventions. In order to agitate against oppressive structures and to improve their lives in ways they endorse, women need the ability to formulate and scrutinize their own values. This conception of autonomy, unlike many other conceptions of autonomy, does not exclude the idea that relationships can be empowering. However, this conception of autonomy is also not sufficient for empowerment; empowerment also requires non-autonomy goods and changes in conditions external to the agent.*

KEYWORDS Gender, Women's empowerment, Autonomy, Agency, Capabilities

1. Introduction: Autonomy and Disappointment

A growing body of literature on women's empowerment questions the value of autonomy. According to this literature, the focus on cultivating women's autonomy obscures the extent to which relationships, social norms, and structures shape their lives (Malhotra and Mather 1997; Leon 2001; Basu and Koolwal 2005; Cornwall 2007a, 2007b; Sardenberg 2008; Kabeer 2011). At the same time, empowerment seems to require the ability to scrutinize social expectations and formulate one's own values. I ask in this paper what precisely this tension implies about the role of the value of autonomy in women's empowerment practice. I argue that understanding thin relational autonomy (TRA) as necessary but insufficient for empowerment allows us to retain the valuable elements of autonomy without denying that relationships and structural change are often important for overcoming oppression. The disappointment with autonomy to which I attempt to respond comes from a gap between theory and practice, so I begin by describing a disappointing autonomy-focused intervention. The example comes from Fiona Leach and Shashikala Sitaram's (2002) ethnographic work on microfinance in Karnataka, India.

Correspondence Address: Serene Khader, Brooklyn College, City University of New York, New York City, USA.
 Email: serene.khader@gmail.com

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1.1. What Was Supposed to Happen

The project's goal was to economically and socially empower scheduled caste women. The NGO only gave loans to women, but the package included training and follow-up support that was supposed to increase the women's skills and confidence to enable them to use loans to become entrepreneurs. To help the women become more comfortable with public commercial interactions, women were also accompanied by male NGO workers to sell silk in the market. In addition to increasing their income by 3–4 times and causing businesses to be registered in the women's names, the intervention was expected to change household gender relations, increase women's community involvement, and enhance their ability to move around in public (Leach and Sitakaran 2002, 577–578).

1.2. What Actually Happened

Two months into the project, the price of silk dropped and little had been sold. The women became increasingly resentful of the NGO as they accumulated debt and also reported increased conflict with their husbands. At the women's behest, the NGO began to allow them to start operating individually (they were originally supposed to start a women's silk reeling collective)¹, and they started earning more money. The women reported increased self-confidence and a sense that their status in the community had improved because they were perceived as businesswomen, but the gains from their individual entrepreneurship were short-lived. By the end of three years, most women had returned to wage labor. Few were economically better off than they were at the beginning of the project, and they seemed to have returned to wage labor partly because their husbands blamed them for economic hardship. The economic skills the women had gained were irrelevant to their waged jobs and household gender relations were unchanged. The women saw the only valuable outcomes as their increased awareness of the barriers they faced, increased mobility and courage to appear in public, and increased say in their children's education (Leach and Sitakaran 2002, 584).

The gap between vision and outcome seems to be caused by an incompatibility between the ideal of autonomy and the following facts: that individuals sometimes care deeply about their relationships and find in them empowerment rather than constraint (perhaps the NGO should have helped the women avoid deterioration of their marital relationships); that individuals are sometimes unable to improve their lives because they are under the force of oppressive social norms (the women simply could not imagine greater household authority for themselves and were relieved to no longer have to go to the market) (Leach and Sitakaran 2002, 585); and that individuals are not superheroes who can simply surmount difficult structural conditions (the women could not change the volatility of the price of silk). Andrea Cornwall encapsulates the disappointing vision thus:

Empowerment is largely regarded as an individual, and indeed individuating, process: spurred by an injection of capital, such as a small loan, women come to enter a pathway to individual self-improvement and self-actualisation, on which they gain capacities and confidence. With this, the narrative goes, they earn the possibilities for greater autonomy, and the ability to exert greater control over their lives. (Cornwall 2007b, 27–28)

At the same time as it shows how the vision of the autonomous woman seems to be out of touch with social and relational realities, the Karnataka example attests to the importance of cultivating individual autonomy. The main benefit the women saw in the project was

decreased acceptance of their situation. Some of the project's failures stem from not cultivating *enough* autonomy. Women who could distinguish their interests from their husbands' and question gender roles would have been less likely to prefer labor that did not challenge the gender status quo. Also, the project was unsustainable partly because of women's inability to challenge, and lack of identification with, the NGO's goals.

In other words, it seems that autonomy was simultaneously the problem and the solution in this intervention. This puzzle invites us to get clearer about what autonomy is and whether it should be a value in development. My aim is to disaggregate forms of autonomy and discuss their relationship to autonomy in a way that solves it. I argue that the lessons about *the value of autonomy* we should take from the critiques advanced by women's empowerment theorists are that (a) that a specific form of personal autonomy I call "TRA" is necessary for women's empowerment, (b) that two other forms of autonomy, substantive independence autonomy and economic autonomy are not, and (c) that not all of the goods constitutive of empowerment are forms of autonomy. The core of my view is this: women's empowerment requires promoting women's capacities for psychic self-direction (TRA). However, we can value this capacity without denying that relationships can be empowering or suggesting that financial self-sufficiency somehow magically causes other forms of autonomy to develop. My conclusion is that we should abandon what I call "autonomy fetishism," but not value for all forms of autonomy.

A methodological note before I continue. My project in this paper is *normative clarification and justification*. I ask what kinds of autonomy we should value and why. I assume that the concerns of women's empowerment theorists who criticize autonomy are correct and attempt to work out the implications for our understanding of the rest of what we value. Though my argument dovetails with the arguments of capability theorists who are developing empirical autonomy indicators (see Alkire 2007), my aim is to help work out the normative underpinnings of such indicators. Where their work departs from the assumption that some form of autonomy is valuable, I ask whether the word "autonomy" is disguising a variety of heterogeneous concepts and attempt to discover which forms are critical for empowerment and why.

2. What We Can Learn from Critiques of Autonomy

I see four distinct critiques of autonomy operating in the critical literature on women's empowerment. Not all of them target the same value. Etymologically, "autonomy" means "being a law for oneself," and conceptions of autonomy converge on the sense of autonomy self-governance. But self-governance admits various definitions, including but not limited to: rejecting social norms, refusing to be motivated by anything but one's own interests, not being enmeshed with others, acting only on values one has reflected on and taken as one's own, having exactly the type of life one wants, being able to see one's interests as distinct from one's family's, refusing to treat others as authority figures, or something else entirely.

The first critique, which I call the *enabling relationships* critique points out that group affiliations sometimes help women increase their power in society. According to Naila Kabeer, women's collectives in rural Bangladesh are "communities of practice" that help women cultivate alternative, less oppressive, imaginative possibilities; through them women can imagine themselves as something other than subordinate (Kabeer 2011). Leach and Sitaram (2002) make a similar critique of the Karnataka silk project; it failed to see that transformed marital relationships could have increased women's desire to remain entrepreneurs when the economy soured (586). The enabling relationships critique worries, to use Sardenberg's (2008) words that "autonomy implies doing things by oneself

without the help of others" (22). Rather than treating relationships as *impediments* to empowerment, the critique suggests, we need to see that relationships can be *catalysts* for it.

A second line of critique is the *value for relationships* critique. This line states that valuing autonomy means believing women should not value relationships. But devaluing relationships, the critique suggests, is out of touch with reality—and also potentially imperialist and sexist. Value for relationships seems to be particularly central to *women's* identities, and value for separation seems characteristic of Western postindustrial capitalism. Cornwall argues that her commitment to autonomy distorted her perception of Yoruba women's values. It forced her to ignore the extent to which women regarded separation from their children with horror (Cornwall 2007a, 160). According to Cornwall (2007a), women often think of themselves in terms of relational roles (158), such as wife and mother. To make the point with reference to that Karnataka silk project: harmonious marital relationships were important to the women; they withdrew from entrepreneurship partly because of tension in their marriage caused by their economic participation (Leach and Sitaram 2002, 583). They also saw their goal as the economic welfare of the *household* (Leach and Sitaram 2002, 580–581). The value for relationships critique suggests that autonomy-based interventions often fail because they ask women to stop caring about their relationships with others—something they often cannot, or refuse to, do.

A third line of critique of value for autonomy is the *adaptive preferences* critique. According to it, the autonomy focus obscures how patriarchal socialization makes it difficult for women to want or know what would empower them. Stewart (2013) argues that we cannot expect people to act autonomously because of the chance that they are motivated by fear of contravening social rules (6). Basu and Koolwal (2005) argue that women often end up deploying newfound autonomy to reinforce traditional wifely duties; for instance women adopt contraception when it will help the family (17–19). In the case of the Karnataka silk example, the project seems to have failed partly because the women could not imagine themselves exerting greater household authority. It did not even occur to them that women could negotiate with their husbands to become household decision-makers (Leach and Sitaram 2002, 581). For adaptive preference critics, empowerment theorists need to stop assuming that women in the status quo can be autonomous; patriarchal socialization makes this difficult or impossible.²

A fourth line of critique calls us to remember that individual women are not superheroes. Autonomy is often thought of as a feature of individuals' psychic makeups. However, transformations in individuals' psychic capacities do not simply vanish structural barriers. We thus cannot expect autonomy-enhancing interventions to produce people who can easily bring about the results they desire in the world. Cornwall argues that the vagaries of poverty prevent Yoruba women from acting on and setting long-term goals—regardless of their high level of autonomy from men (Cornwall 2007a, 158). Similarly, Basu and Koolwal (2005) and Malhotra and Mather (1997, 621) independently argue that women who become educated often lack the power to change society. In the Karnataka silk project, the single biggest catastrophe occurred when the price of silk dropped. No matter how self-sufficient or self-directed the women were, they would not have been able to control market volatility. The idea that people who can critically reflect on their goals, act independently of others, or are financially self-sufficient will automatically become the stereotypical "empowered woman" is wishful thinking. Call this the *external impediments* critique.

I note two curious facts about these critiques now that I have listed them. First, they do not all address the same value. Consider the value for relationships critique and the adaptive preferences critique. The former impugns an ideal on which an autonomous person does not

need, or rejects closeness with, other people. The latter impugns an ideal of autonomy that requires not being influenced by oppressive social norms. Complicating matters further, the external impediments critique impugns ideal of autonomy as the ability to pull oneself up by one's bootstraps. Autonomy as the ability to actually *surmount* structural barriers is different from autonomy as the ability to *question* them. Also curious is the fact that the critiques take different stances toward the value of autonomy. Some of them seem to hold that autonomy is *desirable but impossible*; the adaptive preferences critique seems to hold that being uninfluenced by oppressive norms would be a good thing—it's just not something we can actually expect. Others seem to hold that autonomy is *undesirable*; the enabling relationships critique seems to hold that lacking relationships with others is not necessarily a good thing. Others still are ambiguous; the value for relationships critique seems to say that one form of autonomy, independence from others, is undesirable because relationships promote another (desirable) type—space for questioning oppressive norms.

These facts suggest that discarding autonomy is not a solution. "Autonomy" seems not to be a single value to be discarded or retained. The fact that some critiques seem soluble with *more* autonomy suggests that there are elements of autonomy worth preserving. We need to read the critiques more precisely to avoid, so to speak, throwing the baby out with the bathwater. The critiques suggest the following wish-list, or set of desiderata, for a superior conception of autonomy. A normative vision of women's empowerment should:

- (a) assign moral importance transforming oppressive social relations (implicit in the enabling relationships, adaptive preferences, and external impediments critiques). Call this the *anti-oppression* desideratum.
- (b) not suggest that a woman who values relationships is necessarily disempowered (implicit in value for relationships and enabling relationships critiques). Call this the *relational selves* desideratum.
- (c) require empowerment projects to place a high value on helping women discover and get what *they* value (implicit in all four critiques). Call this the *authenticity* desideratum.

3. TRA as a Necessary Component of Women's Empowerment

In this section, I argue that a vision of empowerment will have difficulty meeting the authenticity and anti-oppression desiderata unless it also includes value for TRA. TRA is a type of personal autonomy. Personal autonomy is the psychic capacity to shape one's self in a way consistent with one's values. A person who is autonomous asks herself what she cares about and attempts to mold her behavior in a compatible way. She is thus not what Diana Meyers would call "conventional by default" (Meyers 1991, 178); she does not do what is expected simply because of a failure to examine social norms or herself. She asks what she cares about and reflects on how various courses of action will express her ideals and affect her ability to live according to them.

Feminist philosophers developed the species of personal autonomy I am calling TRA to grapple with some of the very same critiques made by the women's empowerment theorists. Making a version of the value for relationships critique, Baier (1995) argues that women's value for relationships asks us to change our vision of what a good life looks like. Making a version of the enabling relationships critique, Nedelsky (2001) argues that part of being autonomous is the ability to form a self through creative *interaction*. In a version of the adaptive preferences critique, Meyers (1991, 2002) argues both that the idea of a person who is not influenced by social norms is a fiction and that autonomy should help women

overcome oppressive norms. Thus, TRA is relational both in the sense of facilitating the overcoming of oppressive social *relations* and in the sense of refusing to see all relationships as autonomy-compromising.

TRA is "thin" in the sense of not requiring the agent to adopt any specific set of values in order to count as autonomous; she may autonomously value entrepreneurship or not, traditional femininity, or not, and so on. It is the exercise of competencies for reflection and self-understanding that matters.³ Autonomy involves the ability to ask oneself what one truly desires, the ability to imagine alternative plans of life, the ability to gather information about oneself, and the drive to integrate one's various beliefs and desires into a somewhat coherent whole. The autonomous person asks herself what kind of life she really wants to lead and tries to act in a way consistent with her answers. TRA may be understood as one component of the value capability theorists call "agency." However, in the capability literature, agency does not merely include the ability to form and reflect on values; it also includes the ability to actually *get* what one values. Assuming capability theorists think that a very wide variety of values can be agentially endorsed,⁴ we can think of TRA as the internal component of agency.

I am advocating TRA as a normative *ideal*. No person actually has *complete* TRA, and my ultimate point is that women become *more empowered* through *increased* TRA—not that they can arrive at a completely autonomous end-state. It is also worth noting that, since TRA is a psychic capacity, it does not entail the ability to always *get* what one values. A person with TRA may want things that are not on her "menu" of choices. What is important for TRA is knowing what one values and choosing the option on the menu that is most consistent with it. For instance, a woman in the Karnataka project who has TRA may know that she values a stable income and that she cannot get it because the price of silk has dropped. She manifests TRA by choosing the available course of action most consistent with her goal (in this case, producing silk on her own or returning to wage labor)—even if no optimal course is available. Real people value many things and sometimes have to choose among them, so this example is simplified. But the ability to deliberate about one's many values—say how to weigh value for income and value for harmonious relations with one's husband—is also part of TRA.⁵ The point is that a person with high level of TRA knows what she cares about and acts in ways that aim toward it. She does not need to be able to bring about the desired outcome through sheer force of will.

A normative vision of women's empowerment that does not include value for TRA will have a very hard time meeting the anti-oppression criterion. The oppressive relationships that need to be overcome are of two (interactive) kinds—interpersonal relationships and relationships with social structures. An example of the latter is the Karnataka women's interaction with social norms that exclude women from participating in the market; an example of the former is their interaction with husbands who believe that men deserve unilateral control over household decisions. Transforming either type of relationship usually requires the following TRA competencies: the ability to form relationships of choice, the ability to question oppressive norms and ask about the extent to which one wants to endorse them, and the ability to represent one's own perspective in groups.

The enabling relationships critique asserts that new relationships can be sources of new empowering identities for women. These identities may not only increase personal welfare. They may also, when they are formed in the context of political associations, catalyze transformation of social structures. Kabeer argues that women's solidarity groups change women's senses of self and enable them to agitate for structural change. A key characteristic of such enabling relationships is often that they are *chosen* rather than inherited. Being able to contest the terms of relationships is often what allows relationships to become sites of

less subservient identity. This means that developing enabling relationships requires TRA competencies. Women need to be able to imagine themselves and their relationships otherwise, to ask how existing relationships constitute their senses of self, and to imagine transformations of their selves along with those relationships.

Choosing relationships requires (among other things) a robust sense of self and the ability to ask oneself whether and how one wants to be constituted by the relationships one is in. Opportunities for voluntary relationships, at least ones that challenge the status quo, ask women to examine how new identifications will affect their existing relations with others. (For instance, the women in the Karnataka silk project might have asked "How will my marriage change if I become the kind of woman who asks for authority in the household?") Forming voluntary relationships also demands a sense of self that is not so fragile as to be threatened by changes in the balance of power, and that may be capable of expressing itself in new forms of attachment. ("Will I still be myself if I am less subservient, or will it make me feel like I have failed or my life has no meaning?") Indeed, one way of understanding why the Karnataka NGO failed at remaking women's household relationships is that it did not explicitly ask women to evaluate their personal investments in gender and marriage. (Recall that the women were "surprised" that their marriages were even supposed to be affected by this intervention.)

As Barclay (2001) argues, feminist change does not only require forming *new* relationships. It also requires the ability to recognize contingent qualities in "given" relationships that make them oppressive (66–67). This means that, in addition to requiring the ability to choose relationships and their terms, transforming oppressive relationships—whether structural or interpersonal—requires the ability to critically assess oppressive *norms*. Bourdieu (2002) famously argued that inequality persists partly because people see it as natural. Overcoming poverty and sexist oppression thus often means reflectively scrutinizing views that have been previously accepted because "that's just how the world is." To transform their personal relationships, or fight against structural injustice, women need to be able to recognize oppression as oppression. In many cases, women's acceptance of their condition stems from underdeveloped TRA or a failure to turn their autonomy competencies toward submerged oppressive norms. Such critical assessment of oppressive norms simply cannot occur without the exercise of *individual capacities for value reflection*, capacities that are constitutive of TRA. (However, as I will argue in the next section, TRA does not *guarantee* the ability to reject oppressive norms, it only encourages it.)

The ability to reflectively scrutinize oppressive norms is an *individual* autonomy competency, even if its growth is often *facilitated* in groups. Kabeer (2011) argues that women often need solidarity groups to overcome internalized oppression, because groups are sites of "on-going processes of learning, reflection, action, experience, observation and analysis" (511). But the group is a site for the individual woman's value reflection. It is difficult to imagine a group engaging in genuine reflection and avoiding oppression within the group if individual values cannot be expressed within it. In addition to facilitating relationships of choice and criticism of oppressive norms, TRA also contributes to the overcoming of oppression by enabling the sharing of *divergent* individual perspectives in social movements. Much has been written about the risk of elite capture in development. We know that movements against structural injustice lose effectiveness when they do not prioritize the values and strategies preferred by the populations they affect. The major response to such concerns has been to argue that "local communities" should drive decisions (Chambers 1994). However, the values and desires of the elite (often men) within a local community can come to define its priorities (Narayan 1997), and interventions aimed at empowering women need strategies for offsetting this effect. As intersectional feminist

theories remind us, intragroup marginalization is also possible within groups of women. Women's empowerment theorists argue time and again that participatory engagements with women often end up ignoring, or worse, further marginalizing, women of lower classes and minority religions. Cornwall (2007a) argues that Yoruba women's economic competition with one another is strong enough to vitiate women's solidarity. There is no hope for overcoming such intragroup marginalization if marginalized women lack individual capacities for value reflection and interrogation.

The best hope for movements against structural injustice that are not captured by elites is to allow *dialogue within groups* about which existing practices and values to build on and which to attempt to reshape. Such dialogue will only achieve its goal, however, if individual women have developed TRA competencies. Movements need input from women who are able to scrutinize convention and ask themselves whether they identify with it and whether they are capable of imagining alternative ways of being. Movements also need women who are capable of giving reasons for their beliefs to themselves and others. Movements that resist elite capture need to preserve environments in which individual women can disagree and deliberate about priorities. The need for women to be able to evaluate and articulate their desires is a repeated claim of the feminist participatory development literature (Gujit and Kaul Shah 1998)—even as that literature acknowledges that such strategies are not magic bullets. Thus, even if oppression is overcome through groups, the TRA of individuals is important to those groups performing their functions.

TRA is not only a key ingredient in transforming oppressive relationships; it is crucial for fulfilling another desideratum suggested by women's empowerment theorists who consider themselves critics of autonomy—the authenticity desideratum. This desideratum demands that development interventions be sensitive to women's actual values. The value for relationships critique tells us that women care about relationships, so we should not have an ideal of empowerment that takes relationships as a sign of disempowerment. The adaptive preferences and enabling relationships critiques seem to say that the status quo is disempowering partly because women cannot live in accordance with their real values. Recall Stewart's argument that people had difficulty sorting behavior they actually value from behavior that was socially accepted. Recall also Cornwall's claim that the vagaries of poverty prevent women from forming life plans and acting according to them. These critiques assume that the problem with the status quo is that women have difficulty detecting what they really care about. This critique affirms of the value of TRA, even though it is couched as a critique of autonomy.

At the same time, there is a deep tension between the anti-oppression and authenticity desiderata—a tension I think value for TRA can help navigate. Some of the Karnataka project's failures illustrate this tension. A problem with the project's goal of transforming gender relations was the women's (and men's) lack of identification with the project. The NGO's insistence that only women be involved in the business and only women go to the market was experienced as strange and burdensome, and the goal of transformed gender relations was not on the women's radar. Generically, the tension between authenticity and opposition to oppression is this: the women's existing values are *part of* what keeps the oppressive relationships in place. Wanting to end oppressive relationships and caring about what the women actually value cut against one another when women have adaptive preferences. Presumably there are many cases where women's values and interests diverge; gender socialization tells women to endorse or ignore elements of social structures that harm them.

Some capability theorists have developed indicators of women's empowerment that acknowledge this tension between the anti-oppression and agency desiderata. Alkire (2007) and Heinsohn and Alsop (2005) have argued that we need empowerment indicators

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that allow that women have "reason to value" things they do not already value. Alkire (2007) discusses women who value their identities as caregivers even as those identities compromise their access to other valuable capabilities (173). She thus argues that it is important to find out the extent to which women feel coerced into exercising valued capabilities (i.e. opposing elements of their own oppression). Alkire and Heinsohn and Alsop offer an advance over much women's empowerment literature that fails to adequately distinguish what women desire with what is in their interests.⁶ However, the question of what to do with data indicating divergence between women's desires and their interest in ending their oppression remains unanswered. Getting clearer about what TRA is and how it connects to the capacity to act in one's interests can give normative guidance about how to respond when women do not seem to desire justice for themselves.

TRA is necessary for overcoming internalized oppression, but the cultivation of TRA will not always result in the end of internalized oppression. Recall that TRA is the capacity to act in ways consistent with one's values, and that having TRA requires capacities for self-interrogation and self-reflection. Some other feminist conceptions of personal autonomy, what are called "strong substantive accounts" suggest that a person is only autonomous if she rejects her own subordination (Stoljar 2000). TRA diverges from these in saying that a person may to autonomously accept subordination, but only if it is consistent with other values she holds and if she has reflectively scrutinized it. Opportunities to develop TRA are likely to reduce people's adherence to sexist oppression through a couple of distinct mechanisms. First, as I mentioned before, many women's attachment to oppressive beliefs stems from a lack of occasion to reflectively scrutinize them. In the Karnataka example, it is clear that the women simply have never been asked to consider alternative perspectives on household gender relations. Second, acceptance of sexism is often inconsistent with other values women hold, and enhanced TRA can help them to see that. For instance, there may be a tension between being a capable entrepreneur outside the home and being subordinate within it. An intervention with the goal of increasing TRA might help women resolve this contradiction by engaging them in reflection about their values.

At the same time, understanding the valuable form of personal autonomy as TRA yields the following conclusions: (a) that autonomous acceptance of oppression is possible, and (b) that when there seems to be autonomous acceptance of oppression, women's preferences should not be ignored. For instance, it is imaginable that a Karnataka woman could autonomously accept a subordinate household role, by reflectively scrutinizing the idea and making it consistent with other values she holds. (It is worth making explicit at this point that TRA does not hold that personal autonomy requires having chosen one's values absent social influences; it would be impossible to endorse oppression on such a definition of autonomy but it would also probably be impossible to be autonomous.)⁷ But TRA's allowance of the autonomous acceptance of oppression stems from a feature of TRA that is favorable for development practice. This feature is its insistence that a variety of values can be autonomously endorsed.

This refusal to dictate the values that autonomous people must hold allows development interventions to steer a middle path between refusing to try to alter what women already value and simply overriding their existing values. I have said that women's empowerment theorists want practitioners to take seriously what women actually value. But we need to explicitly note why this is worth doing. One reason is that it seems wrong to force people into doing things for their own good. Underlying value for some form of autonomy is usually the explanation of the wrongness of coercing people into acting in their interests.⁸ But, as I have argued elsewhere, some other reasons to oppose paternalistic coercion arise from these two facts: (a) intended beneficiaries of development projects often have descriptive situational information that those initiating interventions do not have and (b) people's

lives get better if they actually endorse the values according to which they are living. To put these points using an example, the Karnataka women knew things the NGO did not—like that having to make their husbands escort them to transportation to the market was increasing marital tension. The Karnataka women also would have benefitted more from the project if *they* had come to see transformed gender relations as a goal.

Seeing TRA as a necessary component of empowerment provides three important pieces of guidance about what should be done in cases of mismatch between women's interests and desires. First, cultivating TRA requires value-reflection exercises to verify whether women genuinely positively evaluate their oppression, or merely comply with oppressive norms for instrumental reasons. Second, in cases of genuine divergence, the idea that empowerment requires TRA counsels against simply overriding women's desires to advance their interests; this would violate their autonomy. Third, also in cases of divergence, the idea that TRA is one part of autonomy suggests that the optimal empowerment outcome is one in which women genuinely come to value what is in their interest. That is, deliberately engaging them in ways that encourage them to value what is in their interest is empowering, where overriding their desire is not. Suppose the Karnataka women genuinely held a coherent value system on which it was immoral for women to be anything but submissive in the household. If TRA is necessary for empowerment, it would have been necessary to engage them in deliberative exercises aimed at getting them to identify with the goals of household authority and negotiation—rather than simply incentivizing changes in their behavior. The goal would have been a shift in what they autonomously value to what they have reason to value, rather than the dismissal of their existing views as non-autonomous, or, to describe what actually happened, refusal to engage with the women's self-understanding.

4. TRA as Insufficient for Women's Empowerment

Some readers will have noticed this consequence of making TRA necessary for empowerment: it is possible to have TRA and be disempowered. One reason for this is that a woman with TRA may autonomously believe that her oppression is acceptable. But there are other reasons for this as well—reasons that have to do with the fact that TRA is a psychic (internal) capacity, while empowerment cannot be achieved by psychic transformations alone. In this section, I ask what the relational selves desideratum implies about (B: refusing to condemn women who value or need relationships or other external help to become empowered) the relationship between autonomy and empowerment. I claim that valuing TRA is *consistent* with the relational selves desideratum but also that the desideratum suggests that having TRA is insufficient for empowerment.

The relational selves desideratum does not give us a reason to abandon TRA, since TRA allows both for autonomous valuing of relationships and separates the ability to form and scrutinize values from the ability to live according to them. TRA does not dictate what a person must value or what behavior a person must engage in in order to be autonomous; autonomy is a feature of how she stands in relation to her values and behaviors. A person with highly developed TRA can value relationships as long as she has scrutinized them and made her behavior within somewhat consistent with her other values and behaviors (perfect harmony among them is, of course, impossible in practice). Furthermore, conceiving of autonomy as TRA even makes it logically possible to say that relationships can help women become *more autonomous*. Part of what women's solidarity groups do, in Kabeer's example, is help women scrutinize their inherited roles and develop more robustly integrated selves. Those relationships are easily understood as TRA-enhancing.

Saying people need TRA is also not equivalent to saying that people should be able to personally surmount barriers to their welfare. In fact, it is possible for a person to be fully autonomous on TRA and to be thwarted in achieving her life goals. TRA is about formulating a sense of what one cares about, not the ability to make transform the world in the ways one desires.⁹ It is possible for a woman to have reflectively scrutinized oppressive norms, to want to negotiate for greater economic power within her unequal marriage, and to live under conditions where the best she can do to express that desire is secretly hide away part of the household food allowance. This woman would be constrained in what she can achieve but would possess TRA.

Some may see this fact as suggesting empowerment theorists should not value TRA. I see it as reason to do something else—namely to acknowledge that TRA is non-identical with empowerment. The woman in the previous paragraph is clearly not empowered. But that is not surprising, because empowerment is about *more* than an agent's psychic capacities. Empowerment is also about the ability to do and be certain things in the world; and abilities to be and do are not merely features of an individual's psychic makeup. As Nussbaum (Nussbaum 2001) argues, abilities to be and do often have both social and internal components (85). It seems clear that some capacities constitutive of empowerment are distinct from personal autonomy. For instance, it is difficult to make the case that a woman who is routinely subject to gender-based violence, or who is unable to be sufficiently nourished is empowered (or as empowered as she *should* be; she may be more empowered than she was at some previous point in time). But goods like nutrition and safety, though they probably help *sustain* personal autonomy, are neither identical with it nor always required for its development. Many women's struggles against injustice show that it is possible to remain a robust sense of self even in very hostile situations.

Once we recognize that empowerment requires some goods that are not identical with TRA, we can go one of two ways in fashioning a vision of women's empowerment. We can say that empowerment means advocating forms of autonomy *in addition to TRA*, or we can say that empowerment means trying to some achieve values that are *not forms of autonomy at all*. I believe the relational selves desideratum offers reason to opt for the latter. Many conceptions of autonomy that are not TRA, if taken to be constitutive of empowerment, would violate the relational selves desideratum. Consider the conflicts between the relational selves desideratum and two alternative conceptions of autonomy—substantive independence autonomy and economic autonomy.

Substantive independence autonomy is a type of personal autonomy that is expressed in the rejection of social influence and dependency on others (Friedman 2006, 88).¹⁰ A person with substantive independence autonomy sees social norms and relationships with others as impediments to her self-actualization. Women's empowerment theorists seem to have substantive independence autonomy in mind when they indict autonomy for glorifying "success [achieved] without the help of others" or for suggesting that relationships are always impediments. Yet, the critiques discussed at the outset of the paper suggest that *empowerment can be achieved without substantive independence autonomy*. For instance, Kabear's argument that women's groups help women develop more feminist senses of self suggests that TRA and opposition to patriarchy are goods that can be achieved without rejecting relationships. When Leach and Sitaram argue that the Kamataka women would have been better off if their husbands had been made allies of the silk project, they suggest that cultivating substantive independence autonomy was a poor means for attaining income and greater household decision-making authority. Rather than attempting to make the women see themselves as independent of the family unit, the intervention should have encouraged negotiation within it. In addition to suggesting that substantive autonomy is not necessary for empowerment, these critiques suggest that some goods that are necessary for

it—like opposition to sexism in the first example and income in the second—are not forms of autonomy at all.

A second type of autonomy that (when taken to be necessary for empowerment) violates the relational selves desideratum is economic autonomy. Economic autonomy is the ability to not depend on others for access to income. The value for relationships and structural impediments critiques suggest two types of problems with economic autonomy. The first parallels the critique of substantive independence autonomy; key empowerment goods can be achieved without economic autonomy. For instance, in the Karnataka silk project, it seems like women would have had better access to income and household authority if the intervention had not focused so single mindedly on making the women economically independent of men. This is not to say that an intervention that had simply focused on increasing household income would have been sufficiently empowering; we know that simply increasing household income may leave men's power over women intact (Sen 1990). What was needed was an improvement in household economic status combined with transformed gender relations. An ideologically driven commitment to the idea that women's economic *self-sufficiency* was the only path to empowerment turned out to be a problem for women who saw themselves as contributors to a household. Since conceptions of autonomy grounded in economic autonomy and substantive autonomy violate the relational selves desideratum, it is worth asking whether a more adequate conception of empowerment will be more than an amalgamation of forms of autonomy.

Those who think empowerment is an amalgamation of forms of autonomy usually hold a specific view about the value of economic autonomy. For them, economic autonomy always *induces* other forms of autonomy. The view that giving making individual women economically independent of men is a magic bullet that makes them have sufficient income, become critical of patriarchy, have a sense of self-worth, etc. has captured the popular imaginary in the West in recent years (Batliwala 2005). Yet, as the structural impediments critique points out, this seems like a neoliberal fantasy; it takes more than entrepreneurship to become empowered. We know that greater economic autonomy does not necessarily generate other forms. For instance, being financially independent need not result in more TRA—making one's own money does not necessarily affect one's ability to reflect upon and consider the coherence among one's values.

But the problem is deeper than this; we can imagine cases where economic autonomy *did* lead to substantive independence autonomy and TRA, and where women were still *not empowered*. Cornwall's example of the Yoruba women demonstrates this clearly; they are economically self-sufficient, have substantive independence from their husbands and view other women as potential betrayers, and even have some level of TRA (Cornwall 2007a). TRA is their weakest area, however, because the vagaries of poverty make it difficult for them to form long-term plans (Cornwall 2007b). Still, even if they had full TRA addition to substantive independence and their own businesses, they would still be too poor to meet their needs in a consistent way. This too suggests that some non-autonomy goods—like adequate opportunities to meet one's basic needs—are necessary for empowerment. Being able to meet her needs usually positively impacts a person's ability to achieve plans she has autonomously formulated. But not everything that impacts a person's ability to act on autonomously formulated goals is itself a form of autonomy.

5. Conclusion: Autonomy Without Autonomy Fetishism

We can address the concerns of autonomy skeptics while retaining what is genuinely valuable about autonomy by disaggregating forms of autonomy and clarifying their relationship to empowerment. Three important lessons emerge from such an analysis. First, TRA is

necessary for women's empowerment. Without it, women will have difficulty overcoming oppressive social relations and empowerment interventions lose reasons to take seriously what women actually value. Second, economic autonomy and substantive independence are not necessary for women's empowerment—at least not in all contexts. Third, forms of autonomy alone are not sufficient for women's empowerment. The latter two insights flow from the fact that there are non-autonomy goods constitutive of women's empowerment (such as, sufficient income and the absence of strong incentives to accept sexism, potentially).

Now that we have noticed that value for some form of autonomy is compatible with the critiques, we can identify their target more precisely. I submit that the problematic notion is not the idea that women's own values matter. Instead, it is what we might call "autonomy fetishism"—the notion that some form of, or combination of forms of, autonomy is sufficient for empowerment. Fetishism invests near-magical powers into things that do not actually possess them. Autonomy fetishism suggests that the only constraints on the individual come from her internalization of social standards—that changing her consciousness is enough to bring about empowerment. In reality, empowerment requires changing the world, and changing values, not just giving people the capacity to reflect. We need a concept of empowerment that does not obscure this fact. On the other hand, individuals' grappling with their own values is crucial in struggles for change. Viewing empowerment as a combination of TRA and other non-autonomy goods also has the advantage of acknowledging that structural change may require changes in consciousness while allowing that women do not always end up valuing what would reduce their oppression. It opens up the possibility that the most desirable end point is one where women reduce their oppression through activity they autonomously endorse. The critique of autonomy fetishism highlights the importance of structural change for empowerment. Assigning value to TRA reminds us that the *right* kind of structural change is difficult to effect without TRA.

The Karnataka silk project tells a story of both the failures of autonomy fetishism and the importance of TRA. Vesting all hopes in substantive independence and economic autonomy did not turn out to be empowering. Making women economically *independent* could not give them control over market forces. Attempts to make them develop substantive independence autonomy resulted in missed opportunities; women might have become more empowered if they had learned to negotiate with their husbands (and if their husbands had had learned forms of masculinity that allow negotiation with wives) instead of being engaged in activities that made husbands resentful. The fact that the aims of the intervention were largely ones the women never came to embrace did not help matters. To become empowering, income and household authority would have had to be accompanied by conscious endorsement; the women would have needed to begin to integrate value for these changes into their senses of self. A conception of TRA being necessary but insufficient for empowerment asks us not to lose sight of the importance of working on women's own senses of meaning. Engaging with one's *own values* is important for empowerment, even if empowerment is not something one can achieve *on one's own*.

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Notes

1. Though early phases of this project focused on collective entrepreneurship, the later phases are typical of autonomy-focused interventions.

2. The perfectionist view of adaptive preferences I have developed elsewhere is an exception to the this widespread view of adaptive preferences as autonomy-compromising (see Khader 2011).
3. This definition of TRA draws heavily on Meyers' (1991, 2002) work but is also consistent with the theories of several other feminist philosophers, including Friedman (2006), and Nedelsky (2001).
4. I have argued elsewhere that Sen's conception of agency restricts the content of the values that can be agentically endorsed (see Khader 2015).
5. Khader (2011) offers an extended discussion of how even the tragic choices of the poor can express autonomy. For instance, a woman's choice to send her son (rather than herself) to school can express value for long-term security in a world where there is no option that allows women both long-term security and education.
6. Sen's repeated claim that empowerment gives people what they "value or ha[ve] reason to value" (1999, 2002) obscures potential conflicts between women's desires and interests. Similarly, Kabeer's (1999) discussion of empowerment as giving women choices suggests that lack of autonomy is the only reason women fail to value what is in their interests.
7. The idea that it is necessarily non-autonomous to want to be a housewife in a sexist context is widely held. This view usually rests on the idea that autonomy requires not being influenced by social norms. Most autonomy theorists reject this notion because of its implausible assumptions about human socialization. My ultimate view, which says that empowerment is a combination of TRA and other values, says that it is possible for a woman to autonomously value housewifery (if her valuation is reflective and consistent with her other values) but also that her valuing it does not make her empowered.
8. Nussbaum (2001) argues that the desire to respect autonomy motivates the capability approach's emphasis on capability rather than functioning (101).
9. A sense of powerlessness from being unable to get what one wants *could* undermine a person's ability to reflect on what she cares about (because of hopelessness, for instance). However it need not; we know of many cases where the deprived retain very strong senses of how they want the world to be.
10. The strong substantive accounts of autonomy I contrasted TRA to in the last section are versions of substantive independence autonomy. However, those accounts say that autonomy requires rejecting relations of subordination, not all relationships.

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About the Author

Serene J. Khader holds the Jay Newman Chair in Philosophy of Culture at Brooklyn College, City University of New York. She is best known for her work on adaptive preferences and is the author of *Adaptive Preferences and Women's Empowerment* (Oxford University Press, 2011). In addition to her work in development ethics, she publishes broadly in the fields of ethics, political philosophy, and feminist philosophy.

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