

Passive Empowerment: How Women's Agency Became Women Doing It All

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ABSTRACT. In a world where paid work is touted as a development panacea, empowering women has started to look a lot like burdening them. I argue here that this burdening of women is a predictable result of the conception of empowerment as choice or agency. Dominant conceptions of empowerment characterize empowerment as the increase in a person's ability to do what they choose. Yet conditions of gender equality and poverty structure women's options such that choosing (among unacceptable alternatives), doing (too much), and doing *more* (than men) are often both women's best option *and* modes of disempowerment. Seeing the way increased agency can be disempowering requires shifting away from the view that social structures disempower by constraining individual agency. We instead need a conception of power as a constraint on individual action to a conception of power as structuring *the field* of available actions in ways that affect the relative position of social groups. Through a discussion of the gender division of labor and the feminization of responsibility, I argue that a more feminist conception of empowerment will weaken the link between empowerment and individual agency.

Empowering women has started to look a lot like burdening them. Sylvia Chant argues that we are witnessing "a feminization of responsibility and obligation" (2006, 2008, see also 2009), wherein women are expected to do more and more of the

work of development, but their status in societies and households is worsened or unchanged. For example, as women engage in increasing amounts of paid work, responsibility for children's school fees shifts from men to women. As a result, men get more free time and disposable income, while women just get more work. Similarly, Alaka Malwade Basu and Gayatri Brij Koolwal (2005) contend that measures of empowerment conflate empowerment with (often feminized) virtuous activity. They wonder "if the woman who appears autonomous or empowered in answers to questions about her decisionmaking ability on what to cook, to go to the market, or to take a sick child to the hospital has the option to *neglect* these decisionmaking duties" (17, italics mine).

This burdening of women is often traced to misuses and co-optations of the concept of women's empowerment, such as attitudes that instrumentalize women's empowerment as "smart economics" (Chant and Sweetman 2012; Cornwall 2018; Sardenberg 2008; Wilson 2011). Sometimes this burdening is also attributed to a failure to value choice highly enough (Basu and Koolwal 2005, 22; Chant 2006; Chant 2016, 16; Cornwall 2018; Cornwall, Gideon, and Wilson 2008). I think that development's burdening of women is traceable to theory, and especially traceable to the overvaluing of choice. Because we think that empowerment is choice, and that the ability to choose consists in being freed from external constraints to pursuing our goals, it is unsurprising that development interventions keep asking women to do more.

I argue here that the burdening of women is a predictable result of choice-focused conceptions of empowerment, because such conceptions characterize empowerment as increases in a person's ability to do what they choose. Opposing the burdening of women requires seeing how being pushed to choose among bad alternatives, being expected to do, and especially to do *more*, can all constitute disempowerment. Being able to see this, in turn, requires adopting a conception of power as *structuring* the field of available actions rather than as a constraint on individual action.

The paper is divided into four sections. In the first, I argue that prevailing conceptions of empowerment reduce empowerment to what I call "control choice"; readers who already accept that this view is prevalent in development practice can feel free to skim this section. Central to the control-choice understanding of empowerment is the idea that disempowerment is the condition of being prevented from doing what one wants to do. In the second section, I argue that there is a mismatch between the conception of power underlying control-choice conceptions of empowerment and feminism, because the latter requires an understanding of power as structuring relations among social groups. Third, I argue that a structuring conception of power would have to allow that women can sometimes be empowered through strategies besides their own efforts. In the fourth section, I explain why another choice-based conception of empowerment, namely one that conceives choice as the improvement of options, is not a promising alternative to control-choice conceptions—at least with respect to solving the problem of burdening women.

EMPOWERMENT AS CONTROL CHOICE

Empowerment was not always defined as choice or agency, and many more radical empowerment theorists see the emphasis on agency, especially individual agency, as the watering down of a once-radical concept to the point of unrecognizability (Batiwala 2007, 2012; Sardenberg 2008). Nonetheless, talk of empowerment as the expansion of choice or agency¹ is ubiquitous in contemporary development discourse. The World Bank claims that “lack of agency,” defined as “the ability to make effective choices and transform those choices into desired outcomes,” is a key driver of gender inequality (2012, 3). A number of recent academic articles offering overviews of the state of women’s empowerment note that empowerment is widely understood as “power to” (Ohara and Clement 2018), or the “ability to make and act on choices” (Richardson 2018, 541), or as related to “choice, agency, and autonomy” (Gram, Morrison, and Skordis-Worrall 2018, 1367).

This focus on choice and agency is traceable to three different theoretical roots. The first is radical social theory and movements from the 1960s–1980s, including the thought of Paolo Freire (1970) and the earliest women’s empowerment theorists, the Development Alternatives for Women with a New Era (DAWN; 1985). This radical theory treated empowerment as an enhancement of agency (Freire in particular characterized the disempowered state as “passive”). However, the type of agency it emphasized was collective and characterized by its “critical” content. That is, it focused on building the power of social movements, and understood empowering consciousness to be characterized by content that was critical of relations of domination.

The second theoretical root is the work of Naila Kabeer (1999, 2001, 2002, 2008), which explicitly defines empowerment as an increase in the ability to choose. Kabeer defines empowerment as “the expansion of the ability to make strategic choices by people who have been denied this ability” (2008, 19). Kabeer’s work borrows from the aforementioned radical theories but also introduces some important conceptual shifts. For Kabeer, women’s empowerment can (but needn’t be) individual, and the state of disempowerment is characterized largely by its unchosen character.

The third intellectual root is the capability approach and the work of Amartya Sen, which has been immensely influential on the work of organizations such as the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank. This work characterizes the constituents of well-being as increases in agency or freedom.

Kabeer’s and Sen’s theories differ, but the dominant conception of women’s empowerment in development practice draws on commitments that overlap the

1. Most empowerment theorists use “agency” ambiguously, sometimes referring to the choice that is supposed to be constitutive of empowerment, and sometimes referring only to the psychological capacity to set goals (Kabeer mainly uses it in the latter way). To avoid this ambiguity, I use the term “agency” only to refer to the former and use other more specific terms when I am referring to individual psychological capacities.

two theories. The dominant conception conceives empowerment as the expansion of what I am about to call “control choice.” Control choice, variously referred to in existing discussions as “choice” or “agency,” is a person’s ability to effectively do what they want to do.

As will become clear in a moment, in claiming that control choice is the dominant conception of women’s empowerment, I do not mean to claim that either Kabeer or capability theorists explicitly define empowerment as control choice. I mean instead that they reconcile internal tensions in their theories in ways that are only consistent if their underlying conception of empowerment is as control choice. I also mean that it is the conception of empowerment as control choice that has most readily made its way into practice. Part of the reason for the gap between what I am referring to as the dominant conception of women’s empowerment and the explicit statements of Kabeer and capability theorists is that practitioners oversimplify or gloss over conceptual distinctions.² Another part of the reason—the one I will discuss at several points below—is that there are internal tensions in choice-focused theories, so making choice-focused theories internally consistent requires taking a side in a certain debate about what choice is.

CONTROL-CHOICE CONCEPTIONS OF EMPOWERMENT DEFINED

To get clearer about the tensions within dominant conceptions of empowerment, it will be helpful to distinguish two types of choice: control choice and option choice. The distinction maps onto one we make in everyday language between making and having choices (see also Khader 2011, 183). Control choice is something that a person exercises. It is present when a person desires something and makes that thing, or something else that expresses that desire, happen. Option choice is something one has rather than does. It is a feature of an agent’s choice situation and consists in the presence of alternatives to choose among. An agent has more option choice the more options she has. The presence of options can enhance control choice, but it need not. For example, the presence of an option I do not want might be irrelevant to, or even decrease, my control choice. Kabeer, like many other development theorists, uses the words “choice” and “agency” ambiguously, vacillating between claims that suggest control choice is the true underlying notion³ and claims that suggest option choice is.⁴

2. See Richardson 2018 and Gram, Morrison, and Skordis-Worrall (2019) for overviews of the internal tensions in the women’s empowerment literature.

3. Kabeer emphasizes “making choices” (1999, 436), argues that it may be undesirable for external values to be used in measuring empowerment (1999, 458–60), and claims that, in situations where what would decrease women’s subjection to patriarchy and what women value under patriarchal conditions come into conflict, we should consider what is empowering with respect to what women happen to value (1998).

4. Kabeer frequently argues that a person does not really have choices if they lack “strategic” options, going so far as to argue that a person does not have real choices if they do not have the ability to contravene social norms (1999, 441).

However, we can look at a popular schematization of Kabeer's definition of empowerment as an exemplar of a control-choice conception. Recall that Kabeer sees empowerment as the expansion of what she calls strategic choice, where "strategic" means nontrivial. Kabeer schematizes the pathway to empowerment as a move from agency (understood as an internal psychological capacity; 1999, 438) to resources to achievements (1999, 437–38; 2008, 20). Resources, such as money and social capital, are the external requirements that allow the conversion of agency into achievements. Kabeer sometimes uses the words "choice" and "agency" to refer to individual women's internal capacities to form goals (2008, 20) and sometimes uses it to refer to the entirety of empowerment. In describing empowerment pathways, she tends to use the term "agency" to distinguish the internal inputs of goal achievements from the external ones (2008, 20). Her view of the pathway to empowerment is often characterized graphically, using arrows that flow from resources to achievements as follows (see Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland 2006, 10⁵; Gram, Morrison, and Skordis-Worrall 2019, 1352; Richardson 2018, 552):

Resources → Agency → Achievements

This schematization has become popular, not only because it is simple, but also because, unlike conceiving empowerment as the expansion of option choice, it facilitates two other claims about empowerment. First, characterizing empowerment as control choice makes it possible to distinguish empowerment from other forms of change on the grounds that empowerment does not introduce outside values into development. Second, it permits the claim that empowerment avoids treating women as passive. The putative desirability of affirming both of these claims seems to provide much of the reason for defining empowerment as choice expansion in the first place. It is thus unsurprising that choice-focused empowerment theorists, and not just practitioners and popularizers, defend their views with reference to these claims. In doing so, I contend, they reveal underlying commitments to prioritizing control choice over option choice.

EMPOWERMENT AS REFUSING TO INTRODUCE VALUES

Choice-focused empowerment theorists argue that empowerment must draw only on poor women's own values. This argument is available only if empowerment is control choice, however. To say that empowerment is option choice would require saying that some options are valuable for women, irrespective of whether they themselves want access to them. Kabeer's opposition to importing values into the

5. Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland attempt to include an iterative relationship between structure and agency into their graphic, but the graphic moves from left to right and the paragraph surrounding the graphic discusses how opportunities and resources are important because they affect the relationship to translate choice into action.

empowerment process is on display in her claims that it would be illegitimate to expect women and men to always have the same preferences (1999, 439) and that it is important for a conception of empowerment to not rely on “external values” (458–59). Kabeer uses the need for a conception of empowerment to leave open the possibility of women being empowered but rejecting the values of independence and separation as an example of the latter (459–46).

Choice-focused theorists reveal control-choice commitments, not just in their explicit discussions of the role of values in empowerment, but also in their attempts to make sense of situations where the goals of women’s empowerment seem to ask us to question women’s existing desires. In such cases, Kabeer takes the side of respecting women’s choices irrespective of their content. She sometimes claims that we should accept that women who make choices that do not seem empowering to “us” are actually empowered (1998). For example, when confronted with women who do not start businesses with microcredit but still see it as empowering, because bringing loans into the household makes their husbands value them more and allows women themselves to fulfill class-based gender norms around modesty by retreating from the public, Kabeer argues that what those women see as empowering is in fact empowering (1998). In other words, Kabeer reconciles seeming conflicts between the need for empowerment to enhance women’s options and the need to help women pursue their existing goals by prioritizing the latter.

Kabeer offers the most influential and explicitly theorized choice-focused conception of empowerment, but she is by no means alone in claiming that we should tie choice to empowerment because it lets development avoid imposing values on poor women. A recent World Bank working paper claims that empowerment must be “informed by the excluded group’s objectives and desires” (Fox and Romero 2017). Solava Ibrahim and Sabina Alkire define empowerment as the expansion of agency, where agency is the ability to pursue whatever a person regards as important (2007, 384). Alkire and Ibrahim also claim that we should resolve conflicts between what the poor value and what is claimed to be empowering for them by deferring to whatever the poor themselves value (394).⁶

EMPOWERMENT AS ACTIVITY

Choice-focused empowerment theorists also reveal a prioritization of control choice by emphasizing the value of what Gram, Morrison, and Skordis-Worrall

6. There is considerable internal conflict about whether to prefer control or option choice within Ibrahim and Alkire as there is in Kabeer. Alkire and Ibrahim respond to specific cases where women may accept their subordination by claiming that women’s values should not be taken as authoritative (2007, 393). However, the tendency to adjudicating conflicts between what people want and what would objectively empower them has its roots in Sen’s explicit preference for grounding capabilities in what people “value and have reason to value” over a conception of the good. See Khader and Kosko 2019 for a discussion of this phrase in Sen.

(2019) refer to as “direct freedom” (see also Drydyk 2013). Direct freedom is “involvement in realizing one’s own goals” (2019, 1360).⁷ Option choice is not always, and perhaps not even usually, enhanced by direct freedom. Our option sets are often improved (or worsened) by policy makers, the behavior of others, and diffuse social structures. The arrow schematizing Kabeer’s view of empowerment, in contrast, shows power flowing from an individual’s psyche, being enhanced by resources, and culminating in “achievements.” A well-known development manual attempting to operationalize Kabeer’s ideas (Alopo, Bertelsen, and Holland 2006) describes empowerment as an increase in the ability to “envisage and purposively choose” (10–11), and its depictions of poor women are replete with images of potency and latency. What is needed is an increase in women’s ability to “transform” psychological desires “into action” (11).

Choice-focused theorists also emphasize direct freedom when they distinguish empowerment from other forms of social change by claiming that empowerment cultivates human capacities for goal-directed deliberation and accomplishment. Many claim that women improving their own lives is important because it is an exercise of their autonomy, and evoke background assumptions about the necessity of autonomy for moral personhood. In his best known work on women’s empowerment, Sen argues that overlooking women’s ability to make change in their own lives is tantamount to treating them as moral patients (1999, 190). He goes so far as to claim that failing to hold women partly responsible for social change is a way of treating them as less than persons (190).⁸ Drawing on this line of reasoning, Ibrahim and Alkire repeat the view that the alternative to focusing on agency is treating people as “moral patients,” associate empowerment with control over “destiny,” and claim that, because of this, empowerment theorists should see agency as “intrinsically valuable” (2007, 384).

Control-choice theorists assume their interlocutors share their intuition that increased activity adds value to human life and expresses respect for human potential, but this valuation of activity is in fact highly controversial. As G. A. Cohen points out in an early critique of Sen, the idea that people’s lives can be improved only through increased activity relies on a particular, “athletic” vision of human life (1990, 378). Cohen argues that evaluating people’s lives in terms of what they are able to *do* misses the fact that many elements of well-being are not simply not doings. Not having malaria, he argues, is not itself a doing—and calling it one elides the difference between a person actively bringing about her not having malaria (by say, taking medicine or using a mosquito net) and just not having it (372). It also “overestimates the place of freedom and activity in well-being” (377).

7. Gram, Morrison, and Skordis-Worrall (2019) see this as an operationalization of Sen’s view of agency.

8. See Crocker 2008 for a reading of Sen on which valuing active deliberation and participation in change in one’s life is part of respect for persons. See Klein 2016 for an argument that Sen’s emphasis on agency licenses neoliberal approaches to development.

So when choice-focused theorists argue, or mobilize rhetorics that suggest, that increasing individuals' ability to do is a way of respecting their personhood, they reveal an implicit prioritization of control choice over option choice.

THE MISMATCH BETWEEN CONTROL-CHOICE CONCEPTIONS OF EMPOWERMENT AND FEMINIST CONCEPTIONS OF POWER

I have argued that prevailing conceptions of empowerment are control-choice conceptions. To understand why control-choice conceptions justify the burdening of women, we need to get a better picture of how they characterize power. On control-choice conceptions, power is the individual ability to achieve goals one wants to achieve. Disempowerment is the presence of constraints on the individual ability to achieve. The characterization of power at work here is at odds with the feminist insistence that power is structural. Adopting it means failing to attend to the ways in which being pushed to choose (among unacceptable options), being expected to do, and especially being expected to do *more*, are often vehicles for women's disempowerment—or so I will argue.

THE THEORY OF POWER UNDERLYING EMPOWERMENT AS CONTROL CHOICE

Embedded in control-choice conceptions of empowerment are five assumptions about power that facilitate the confusion of empowerment with burdening. First, in conceiving disempowerment as the presence of barriers to a person doing what they want to do, control-choice conceptions relativize disempowerment to a person's existing goals. Something only counts as disempowering from a control-choice perspective if it prevents the agent from doing something she *wants* to do. This raises questions about whether control-choice conceptions can explain what is disempowering about adaptive preferences—that is, what is disempowering about having one's desires shaped by injustices, like those imposed by race, gender, ability, and class injustice.

Second, and largely as a result of relativizing disempowerment to an agent's goals, control-choice conceptions emphasize a certain "informational base" about what empowers and disempowers an agent. They emphasize potential courses of action that are available from the perspective of individual deliberation. However, changes to institutions and the behavior of others are not likely to appear as "on the table" from the perspective of individual deliberation. Most norms and institutions require power and collective action to change. It is often rational for an individual to assume that changing them is not within the scope of their individual action, both because women and the poor often make factually correct assessments about how institutions in unequal societies are unlikely to respond to them, and because oppressive norms often create collective action problems for women,

wherein individual women stand to benefit from complying with norms that disadvantage women as a group.⁹

Third, control-choice conceptions imagine power as something that enables or constrains action—rather than as something that shapes or affects the quality of action. Power, on control-choice conceptions, is something a woman has more of the more able she is to achieve her goals. This notion of power contrasts with a notion of power as the type of thing that makes certain goals more appealing than others. This distinction between power as something that constrains and shapes will be familiar to readers of Foucault (1990). However, one need not adopt all of Foucault's ideas about power to accept the rough idea that power can be conceived as that which structures people's actions—in the sense of making them choose certain options over others, creating the menu of options among which they choose, and reproducing certain relations among social groups as a result.¹⁰

The idea of power as constraining rather than structuring associates power with activity. The arrow from agency to resources to achievements suggests that women have potential that additional resources would free up into action. Admittedly, this association between activity and achievement is just that—an association rather than a logical implication. However, as I have already discussed, many control-choice theorists actively embrace this implication. Moreover, in neoliberal contexts, the association between power and the liberation from passivity to activity is strong, and influential within development contexts (see Hickel 2014; Khader 2018, 50–75).

Fourth, control-choice conceptions imagine power as an attribute of agents. This limits the types of things that can have power. On choice-control conceptions, only individuals or groups that act collectively can have power. But not all groups relevant to feminist analysis are agents in the sense of being able to produce intentional action. The social group “women” may be too diffuse to be an agent. If this is true, control-choice conceptions suggest that empowering women as a social group has to be a byproduct of empowering individual agents or groups of women acting together—or that talking about empowering women as a group is simply a category error.

Fifth, control-choice conceptions ask us to assess power only diachronically, rather than comparatively. By this, I mean that they ask us to assess only whether women are doing better or worse than they were before, not how they are doing relative to others.

9. For a discussion of how collective action problems incentivize individual women's oppressive norm compliance, see Khader (2016).

10. In the terms of the faces of power literature, the structural view of power I am describing combines the effects of the second, third, and fourth faces of power without requiring that an agent cause them.

On control-choice conceptions, for something to count as a form of disempowerment, it must prevent an individual person from doing what she wants. This excludes many things feminists see as sources of disempowerment—such as unjust choice architectures (which force women to choose among unacceptable options), the behaviors of others such as men (which often have the power to set expectations of what women do), and relative inequalities between women and men (that take the form of women being expected to do *more*). To explain these omissions less abstractly, and to see how they lead to the burdening of women, it will be useful to consider the example of the gender division of labor. In the gender division of labor, social structures cause households to be organized such that men do more paid work outside of the home than women, and women spend more hours engaged in unpaid housework and care work. The gender division of labor is a relatively typical oppressive¹¹ social practice in that it is structurally caused and disadvantages women relative to men. It is also a typical *gendering* practice (rather than merely a practice that affects women) in the sense that it is a practice that dictates behavior to men and women and produces social inequality between them as a result.

Control-choice conceptions of empowerment can only go so far in diagnosing the ways the gender division of labor disempowers women. This is not to deny that there are clear-cut cases where the gender division of labor impedes control choice. For example, a woman may want to be a stonemason but have never had access to the training, or live in a society that stigmatizes women engaging in such work. Or she may want to leave her husband but find that social norms preventing her from accessing income prevents it. But there are many cases in which the disempowerment women experience as a result of the gender division of labor does not diminish control choice. For example, it might not enter into a woman's mind that a possible goal would be for her husband to engage in more household labor. Or, the gender division of labor might make women less likely than men to want to be stonemasons, but not to a degree that the individual woman perceives herself as wanting to be a stonemason and being prevented.

Most of the distinctive harms of the gender division of labor do not appear as disempowerment on control-choice conceptions. One reason for this is that the gender division of labor disempowers women as a social group, but control-choice conceptions do not allow social groups to count as subjects of empowerment. Since control-choice conceptions restrict objects of empowerment to groups that can exercise agency, the object of empowerment is at best small groups of women or organized social movements—but more typically individual women. This is not to deny that groups of women can act together, as they do in cooperatives and social

11. Oppression, according to Frye (1983), occurs when one social group is systematically disadvantaged relative to another.

movements; it is only to point out that such movements are rarely coextensive with the social group “women.” It may be objected that the disempowerment of women as a group is just each individual woman having her options constrained. But, as we shall see below, this misses the fact that gendering is produced partly by affecting the *likelihood* that women will engage in certain courses of action, and this likelihood must be perceived in the aggregate.

A second reason control-choice conceptions of empowerment struggle to explain the disempowerment of the gender division of labor stems from the relativization of goals to women’s desires and the focus on the perspective of individual deliberation. The gender division of labor gives women reasons to take its dictates as fixed in formulating their goals. One way it does this is by encouraging women to internalize the values that support it in “classic case adaptive preference” (Khader 2013).

Another way social structures encourage women to take the gender division of labor as fixed has nothing to do with women internalizing oppressive values. Individual women have little to no control over prevailing norms about women’s work, so a woman is often right not to perceive changing these norms as within the scope of what she can accomplish. A woman may want to be paid for care work and be able to work outside the home for pay but know that she cannot bring this about on her own, and thus instead focus on the goal of taking on paid sewing at home in addition to care work, because this—however costly to her energy and status—is something she can individually accomplish. If she is only disempowered insofar as she is prevented from doing what she can individually do, this situation does not disempower her. Perhaps more troublingly, on a control-choice conception, choosing to continue unpaid care work and taking on sewing in addition—if this is what she wants—is empowering.

Pointing out that we could enhance the choice about whether or not to endorse these gender norms through consciousness-raising does not solve the problem with control-choice conceptions. After all, the very idea that endorsement of oppression is especially likely to be unchosen draws on normative commitments beyond control choice (see Khader 2011, 74–107). More important for the current argument is the fact that being able to question the norms is not the same thing as being able to change the social context where it is rational to comply with them. The latter is rarely something one can take up as an individual goal.

A third reason that control-choice conceptions have trouble capturing gendering practices like the division of labor as disempowering is that oppression is a comparative or relational phenomenon. The problem of the gender division of labor is partly that it makes women less likely than men to do some things and more likely than them to do others, and that it causes men to have more of many important resources, such as income, care, and the ability to exit relationships, than women. Yet the fact that control-choice conceptions of empowerment measure empowerment over time, rather than compared to others, means that they do not ask us to track how well women are doing compared to men.

The concrete upshot of the noncomparative nature of control conceptions is that they cannot identify disempowerment in situations where women do more than men because it is their best shot at getting what they want. But the feminization of responsibility I described in the first sentences of this paper disempowers in just this way; it involves women doing more to pursue their genuine goals (such as the goal of earning more income) while remaining, or becoming even more, unequal with men.

The relational character of the gender division of labor is also difficult for control-choice conceptions to object to because of two of their other features. Reducing power to something an agent has gets in the way of seeing how power shapes the relative *probabilities* that women and men will engage in certain behaviors. The gender division of labor is perpetuated by a choice architecture (Haslanger 2016).¹² Control-choice conceptions' restriction of our informational base to that which is relevant for individual deliberation also gets in the way of seeing choice architectures themselves as disempowering. After all, a choice architecture can push women subtly toward certain options in ways they are unaware of, and in ways that are perceptible only when we look at differences between women's and men's work in the aggregate. For example, women may spend a larger percentage of their income on children, but any individual woman may think the reasons she does this have more to do with individual personality than with gender.

Fourth, control-choice conceptions require us to think of gendering practices, like the gender division of labor, as disempowering women by getting in the way of their achieving their goals. The problem is that this pushes many key elements of gendering practices out of the scope of normative analysis. The gender division of labor is simply not the same thing as women being prevented from working outside the home. It is of course true that women often have the goal of working for income and that sexist social norms often prevent them from achieving this goal. But the gender division of labor includes the devaluation and invisibilization of housework and care work, and the view that it is degrading to men to engage in these. We should expect the gender division of labor to continue to disempower women until there are changes to the valuation of care work and housework, and likely until there are significant changes to how much of this work is done by men.

We are now in a position to characterize the mismatch between feminism and the theory of power underlying control-choice conceptions of empowerment more directly. Here, control-choice conceptions draw on a conception of power that is not structural. Social structures, as Haslanger (2016) argues, characteristically constrain the behavior of individuals by making certain courses of action more readily available and more appealing than others, and by funneling them into a *place* within the overall structure. To occupy a place is to be an instance of a

12. The term "choice architecture" was coined by Sunstein and Thaler to refer to describe the way a menu of choices is arranged to appeal to a consumer. Haslanger uses it to mean both this and the menu itself. I use the term in Haslanger's sense.

type that is related to other types (Haslanger 2016, 129), such as the social group women as related to the social group men.

The idea that control-choice theorists do not conceive power structurally may seem surprising, given that control-choice theorists are preoccupied with the term “structure.” A major manual on conceiving empowerment discusses empowerment as “a dialectic between structure and agency” (Alsop, Bertelsen, and Holland 2006), but its operational definition of structure is as that which constrains or enables agency. Similarly, Kabeer wants to accommodate the effects of “rules and norms” (1999, 437) but then distills their effects into resources or lacks of resources that enable or impede achievement. Control theorists, in other words, seem to treat structure as synonymous with “external constraint on action.”

In reality, structures can affect people by preventing individual action, but it is not the only or characteristic way. We do not need the concept of social structure at all to understand that a woman may not be able to work outside the home because her husband prevents her, or that social norms cause her to think that housework is her job. We need the concept of structure to make sense of how women’s options are shaped so as to cause differential outcomes for men and women, both at the individual level, and in the aggregate. The disempowerment caused by gendering phenomena, like the gender division of labor, can only be understood with reference to how social groups are positioned relative to each other and the choice architectures that cause this inequality to reproduce itself.¹³ Social structures do not merely operate by constraining individual control choice, and thinking they do comes at significant feminist cost.

But perhaps we should not expect a conception of women’s empowerment to be able to count the gender division of labor as disempowering. It may seem that I am expecting the concept of women’s empowerment to do too much, and that a conception of women’s empowerment should not be expected to be a conception of feminism, or a conception of how to end unjust gendered power relations. Kabeer herself argues that empowerment is distinct from “emancipation,” where the latter is the realm of rights and equality (2008, 14). This is an important objection, and I have strong sympathy for the idea that there might be value in distinguishing what improves individual women’s lives from what improves gender relations.¹⁴ But it is clear that most development discourses do not make this distinction, and that women’s empowerment is widely conflated with, or treated as the main or only means to gender equality.¹⁵ I acknowledge that another way to see the burdening of women as a problem would be to take feminist social change to be a

13. See Cudd (1994) for a discussion of how background options can be structured so that women’s own choices cause women’s oppression.

14. For an important discussion of the contrast between these phenomena, see Molyneux (1985). See Khader (2015) for how individual women’s well-being and women’s interest in ending oppression can come into conflict in development practice.

15. Both the Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals fail to distinguish women’s empowerment from gender equality. See Chant and Sweetman (2012) and

separate policy goal from women's empowerment, and claim that promoting the burdening of women is a problem that stems from the latter.

PASSIVE MODES OF EMPOWERMENT

With a more structural conception of power in hand, we can see how improvements in a woman's control choice can worsen gender relations and burden her. A woman can have increased ability to do what she wants, but, because of external constraints on her options or internalized oppression, engage in activities that do nothing to change, or worsen, the status of women as a group. She can have barriers to her active doing removed, and, because of the combined exigencies of gender injustice and poverty, end up working to the point of exhaustion. Finally, because having increased ability to execute goals than one had before is not the same thing as becoming more equal, a woman's control choice can increase while she becomes even worse off than the men in her household, or worse off than a similarly situated man.

My point here is not the familiar one about how enhancing women's agency is *insufficient* for empowerment. Arguments for this point usually take agency to be an internal psychological capacity and point out that empowerment needs to resist "psychologizing the structural" (see Khader 2011, 56). Instead, I am claiming that conceiving empowerment as control choice can *impede* attempts to eliminate gender inequality. If, on the one hand, we see power as something that prevents individual women from doing as much as they could, rather than as something that shapes their choices to keep them as a group subordinate to men, we are likely to end up prescribing changes that burden women and do nothing to change (or which might worsen) their relative status. If, on the other hand, we see power as structural or *structuring*, we must open the door to pathways to empowerment that are not easily described as enhancements of women's agency. I discuss four such pathways below.

IMPROVING GENDERED-CHOICE ARCHITECTURES

I have said that one way women are disempowered is by being forced to choose among unacceptable options. By this I mean that women face a menu of options that incentivize, and influence, women to accept and perpetuate gender inequality. Combatting this form of disempowerment has to mean changing the menu. Such changes need not be brought about directly by women, and frequently *cannot* be brought about by individual women. To undo the gender division of labor, women need options for doing less care and house work and access to better paid work,

Batliwala (2012) for a discussion of how a very narrow form of women's empowerment has been treated as the only way to operationalize gender equality.

or the valuation of each type of work needs to change. The idea that individual women can change this because women's engagement in paid work will automatically change men, or because women will begin to bargain with their husbands, misses the incentive structure facing many poor women. Under conditions of poverty, the appeal of paid work to women is going to be strong, and exhaustion and increased or unchanged subordination because of intransigent gender norms may seem like an acceptable price to pay.

This is not to deny that individual women's lives can go better as a result of paid work, or that women might make household gains by bargaining, but rather to point out that the focus on control choice makes this the preferred solution when it need not, and perhaps should not, be. Why is it morally acceptable to focus on empowering women to bargain, when the bargaining already occurs within an unacceptable menu of options, a menu that could be enhanced through means besides women's own action? For example, public policies could subsidize child care or men's involvement in care work, or raise the minimum wage. Development interventions could train women for high-prestige jobs that bring in more than subsidiary income, even if it required changing women's own perceptions of whether this was an acceptable goal.

Another reason thinking of empowerment as control choice obscures the fact that new choice architectures can be an empowerment pathway stems from the assumption that power works by preventing individuals from acting. Since gender often works by ranking the relative desirability of options, it may be deceiving to think that empowerment is about removing barriers to engaging in one without increasing barriers to engaging in others. Changing the feminization of responsibility, for example, is likely to require increasing the appeal of house work and care work, for example, by incentivizing men's participation in it.

CHANGES TO GENDERED ADAPTIVE PREFERENCES

This last point brings up another way in which being forced to choose among unacceptable options disempowers women; it encourages them to internalize oppressive norms and value systems. Changing the gender division of labor means changing widely accepted views like the view that care work is less valuable than paid work, or that women's lives are meant to be full of suffering. There are at least two reasons that a development practice focused on expanding control choice will fail to promote interventions that reduce internalized oppression.

First, changing gendered adaptive preferences may mean not just changing women's goals, but changing norms and beliefs (see Cornwall 2016). The idea that empowerment is control choice suggests that classic case adaptive preferences ought to be left in place and supported through additional resources. Yet, as is often observed, fulfilling gendered adaptive preferences can perpetuate women's disempowerment. Fulfilling such preferences is likely to be particularly harmful when their content includes views that devalue women and their work, and where empowerment is associated with activity and goal achievement (as it is on control-choice

conceptions). If, on the one hand, power primarily affects women by making it difficult for them to do what they want, and women have internalized the view that suffering, or caring for the household is women's role, empowerment is going to take the form of "liberating" women's potential to work more. If, on the other hand, power is structuring, women's empowerment might sometimes be better achieved by changes to how women *think* than changes to what they do. (I will turn to the related question of what men think and do in a moment.)

Second, changes to internalized oppressive beliefs may need to occur on such a broad scale that individuals rightly do not see them as changes that can be brought about through their own action. In fact, interventions that change gender norms often do not target specific individuals at all. Public education programs and media campaigns may target entire communities and not just the women whose agency needs expanding—and in fact may be more effective as a result of doing so. Nudges may target people besides the women who are supposed to be being empowered. For example, interventions that train healthcare providers to nudge men into being more active fathers show promise in the area of changing norms around men and childcare (Promundo 2019, 52). Additionally, some of the most effective public education campaigns target youth and adolescents, and a focus on increasing the agency of existing women can prevent us from investing in these types of campaigns. Of course, Freirian conscientization wherein women question the perceptions into which they have been socialized has an important role to play in empowering women, but the focus on enhancing women's ability to achieve their goals may deceive development practitioners and policy makers into thinking that these changes can only be achieved by women.

REST

It is not only being expected to choose that can be a source of women's disempowerment, it is also being expected to *do*. Part of women's poor disempowerment lies in their living under conditions where there are always incentives for them to do more, and where they may have adapted their beliefs and aspirations to such conditions.¹⁶ Thus, reducing the feminization of responsibility requires a specific type of change in opportunity structure that is particularly poorly achieved through women's own agency—increased incentives to rest. The athleticism of control-choice conceptions of empowerment encourages us to think that doing more is better for women. To change this, we need a conception of empowerment on which rest can be empowering.

It may be objected that control-choice conceptions can explain why rest is empowering; women want rest, and women should be able to get it. It is clearly true that women want rest, but it is far from clear that policies that aim to enhance control choice will be able to prioritize fulfilling this want. For one thing, part

16. Fauzia Ahmed's (2014) work on how poor women in rural Bangladesh define empowerment reveals that the women place a high value on the ability to rest.

of what attracts development theorists and practitioners, and certainly neoliberal development actors, to control choice is the association between control choice and activity. More importantly, increased ability to rest is likely best achieved through changes to options, changes that it often does not occur to individual women to achieve, and that it is often not within their power to achieve. Unless women's option sets are changed, doing more will continue in most cases to be the best available choice. For poor women living in environments where there are few opportunities that would permit an escape from poverty, and where men are unlikely to change quickly, taking on (more) paid work and keeping up a high level of unpaid household work is often the best option.

In fact, most theoretical work on time use is clear that *choice* about how to use one's time is only a helpful indicator of justice for individuals who are not very poor. The notion of temporal autonomy, for example, measures discretionary time, where discretionary time is defined as time that is left over after an individual has engaged in all of the activities necessary to meet their needs (see Goodin 2009, 5). But poverty is a state of having unmet needs, and poverty makes women's interest in being free to use their time as they wish and their interest in rest compete with each other. These interests competing with each other is tragic, and the only way to protect women's rest may be to make policy that promotes rest as distinct from other goals that can be achieved by more work.

CHANGES TO MEN

A structural conception of power allows us to see that women are disempowered, not just by being expected to choose and do—but by being expected to do *more* than men. If this is true, women can be empowered by changes to men. The gender division of labor can be changed by men changing their attitudes about women's work, and actually taking on more domestic work and care work (and experiencing changes to their opportunity structures that would permit them to do it). If this is right, then women can be empowered by interventions that target men.

Indeed, there may be moral and practical reasons to focus on interventions to empower women but target men (see Chant 2016). I have already noted that asking women to bargain for greater household status burdens them, and that this burdening is in need of moral justification. Targeting men may also be more practically effective. Given that the idea that men can perform care and house work seems more intransigent than the idea that women can perform paid work (Promundo 2019), there are good practical reasons for focusing policy changes on men.

It might again be objected that control-choice theories of empowerment can explain why men should change their behavior; women want to do less house and care work and men's willingness to do it is a "resource" that enables women to do other things they desire. It should first be noted that this reason for changing men is not available in cases where women have internalized oppression, and the idea of changing men's opportunity structures may not look available from the perspective of individual deliberation. Putting these points to the side, though,

I would emphasize that the idea that women's agency needs increasing, combined with the association between empowerment and activity, directs development theorists and policy makers to focus interventions on the individuals whose agency is supposed to be improved, even if it does not do so conceptually. It is not coincidental that development interventions that attempt to achieve gender equality by focusing on men are just now arriving on the stage, after decades of interventions that increase women's workloads in the name of increasing their agency. Additionally, the idea that changes to men's behavior directly frees women up to pursue their projects may be useful in explaining cases where men impede women from engaging in activities like socializing or working outside the home. It may be less helpful in explaining cases where changes to men are supposed to free women to rest rather than to act.

Moreover, control-choice conceptions of empowerment deny that men having more than women is a problem in its own right. This is because of their non-relational and diachronic character; they ask us only to measure whether women are doing better at achieving their goals than they were before. A problem with this is that there are cases where men's ability to achieve their goals improves at the same time as women's, and this will lead control-choice conceptions to yield false positive results in terms of women's empowerment. For example, women and men may at the same time increase the amount of income they bring into the household. If men spend this on personal consumption and women spend it on children and household expenditures, as much empirical data suggest they do (see Basu and Koolwal 2005, 17–19; Chant 2006, 178–79), increasing men's altruism may be key to empowering women. The need for this can only be captured with a relative or comparative conception of empowerment, however.

AN OBJECTION: EMPOWERMENT AS OPTION CHOICE

So far, I have argued that the conception of power underlying choice-focused conceptions of women's empowerment biases us in favor of solutions that burden women and leave intact or worsen oppressive systems of gender. My argument to this effect has, however, equated choice-focused conceptions of empowerment with ones that treat empowerment as control choice. It may seem that we can save choice-focused conceptions of empowerment by conceiving empowerment as increased option choice. If empowerment consisted in expanding the number of choices women had available, it would indeed be easier to capture the importance of the passive modes of empowerment I have just described.

Yet, as I argued in the first section, conceiving empowerment as option choice would cancel out many of the alleged benefits of calling empowerment "choice" to begin with. Much of the appeal of defining empowerment as the expansion of agency derives from the view that development interventions should be guided

by the priorities of affected communities. However, under conditions of oppression and deprivation, women may choose courses of action that perpetuate their condition—and have self-interested reasons to do so. Many of the interventions that would change women's options are not the interventions that would be prioritized by women with internalized oppression, or by women who are rightly reasoning about what is within the scope of their individual action. Knowing that they cannot change the gendered-choice architecture that funnels women into occupations where they can earn money from home, it is rational for individual women to seek, or seek expanded opportunity in, such feminized occupations. Knowing that they cannot change the fact that everyone in their household working to exhaustion may still not bring their household out of poverty, poor women are likely to seek more work rather than more rest, and so on. So, saying that increasing women's option choice by, say, incentivizing men's participation in care work or funneling women into high-prestige fields, is, in many cases, incongruent with women's existing priorities. To acknowledge this is not to deny that women might have deep desires for this type of change that could be revealed after self-investigation and social change, but it is to acknowledge that moral judgments besides women's own existing ones are involved in speculating about what women will come to value over time.

Additionally, I reiterate that those who advocate the view that empowerment is agency want to associate empowerment with activity, and defining choice as options does not facilitate this putatively desirable connection. Having more options may mean one does less. Of course, I think women doing less is probably a good thing. My point is just that if the control-choice theorist is willing to concede this, it is unclear what advantage they are gaining by referring to opportunities as choices. If calling options "choice" does not support the implications that seem to make this renaming desirable, it is unclear why we should bother with the renaming at all.

It may appear that the solution for the choice-focused empowerment theorist is to say that empowerment is a combination of option choice and control choice. This is in fact the position that I believe most choice-focused empowerment theorists, and certainly Kabeer (1999), are trying to argue for. But increasing option choice and increasing control choice often come into conflict in development contexts. The example I just gave about whether to increase men's altruism or give women access to paid work inside the home is one example of this; focus on option choice likely asks us to prefer the former, control choice the latter. Saying we should value both does not help us resolve the conflicts. I focused on control choice in this paper partly because choice-focused empowerment theorists who go far enough to acknowledge the conflict usually say we should adjudicate the conflict by prioritizing control choice, as Kabeer does when she famously says that access to microcredit that does not change gender roles is empowering because women value it (1998).

There is another way of attempting to reconcile control and option choice into a single conception. On this answer, we favor control choice only once all of an

agent's options are acceptable. his answer is suggested by capability theorist Serena Olsaretti (2005), who argues that some goods are worth having, even if one does not have choice about whether to have them or benefit from them (2005, 94–95). Her own example, drawn from Cohen's original discussion, is freedom from malaria, but we might think of freedom from the norm of men's nonparticipation in care work in a similar way. This route is appealing, but again abandons many of the entailments and associations that made it seem desirable to call empowerment "choice" to begin with. Prioritizing option choice with regard to some basic needs, as Olsaretti does, means taking stances about what is desirable that may not coincide fully with women's own stances. This incongruity is much more likely to arise when the stance in question is about gender roles and not malaria.

There is a third route to claiming that empowerment is option choice, and it is one that says that option choice and control choice are the same if we think of the object of empowerment as the collective agent "women" rather than the individual woman. This route does go a long way in eliminating conflicts between control choice and option choice caused by collective action problems—that is, conflicts created by the fact that women need social norm change but an individual woman cannot change norms.

However, as I have already argued, the social group "women" may not be the type of group to which it makes sense to attribute agency. It is also unclear what is theoretically added by casting improved options as what women as a group choose. If the point of this move is to preserve the idea that empowerment aims at finding out what women want and supporting their ability to do it, this move also carries with it enormous potential to burden women. Of course, there is significant value to women being the instruments of change in many cases, but defining empowerment as the control choice of women as a group means defining empowerment so that it can only be achieved by women's own activity. It is one thing to point out that women's movements are crucial for social change and that existing notions of empowerment miss this, but it is another to say that the only thing that counts as empowering is change that women make themselves. If phenomena like the gender division of labor are disempowering, there may be an important role for public policy, and action by others, to play in empowering women.

CONCLUSION: WE CAN'T GET THERE FROM HERE

Control-choice conceptions of empowerment suppose that empowerment consists in increasing women's ability to do what they choose. Yet the reality is that being pushed to choose (among unacceptable alternatives), being expected to do (too much), and being expected to do *more* (than men) are modes of women's disempowerment. To support the overcoming of these forms of disempowerment, we need to weaken the link between empowerment and individual agency. As long

as power is conceived as the ability to do what one wants, doing more within an oppressive-choice architecture is going to look like the solution to women's problems. Only once we recognize that power also consists in having a better set of options, and having the relative status of one's group changed, will we see that empowerment can come about without women doing more.

My point is not that there is no value to expanding women's agency. It is instead that defining empowerment as agency denial artificially narrows the types of interventions that count as empowering women—and does so in a way that leads to a preference for interventions that worsen gender injustice. Feminist critics of women's empowerment often point out that empowering individual women is an insufficient strategy for change, that we need changes to external conditions and unjust structures. I agree with these critics but suggest something stronger. Conflating empowerment with choice and agency sometimes means (a) prescribing counterproductive strategies (as in the feminization of responsibility) and (b) making it impossible to conceive more gender-just strategies (like better public policy, or interventions directed at men) as empowering.

It may seem that, in claiming public policy and interventions directed at men can empower women, I miss the distinctiveness of the concept of women's empowerment. There is something to this worry. The concept of women's empowerment genuinely did grow out of dissatisfaction with development processes that did not take women's voices into account. But taking women's voices into account is not the same thing as expecting women to help themselves. Sen's argument that women's agency role was denied in policies that focused only on women's well-being might better be understood as an argument that women's equality, especially within the household, was absent from traditional development paradigms. This is a worry explicitly articulated in one of the oldest texts on women's empowerment, the 1984 statement of Development Alternatives for Women with a New Era. DAWN argues that the reason to prioritize women's empowerment over straightforward incorporation into development is that development was based on faulty assumptions about what women needed and wanted (15). These faulty assumptions were that disempowerment was women's lack of access to the goods traditional development paradigms prioritized, and that the goods women needed were access to income, land, and resources.

In other words, the distinctive focus of women's empowerment was on public policy listening to women's voices about what would make them more equal. There is thus a sense in which women's activity was central to women's empowerment—in the sense of women's participation in shaping the development agenda. But this is a far cry from empowerment consisting in individual women, or even small groups of women, pursuing the goals of development for themselves. It is also a far cry from empowerment consisting in women pursuing what their best option, or their perceived best option, is under oppressive circumstances. The DAWN collective made explicit that their audience was agencies and governments (87) and that their aim was greater democracy. What I have called “passive empowerment”

is compatible with development priorities being arrived at more democratically and involving greater input from women. In many cases, it is difficult to imagine understanding how choice architectures are working to keep women in their place except by asking women themselves (see Khader 2011). Indeed, this emphasis on democracy preserves what is best in the idea that development should not foist goals on affected communities, without taking on many of the above problems with conflating empowerment with individual choice.

Programs that claim to empower women are actually burdening them. This burdening may seem at first blush to consist in women's lack of choice. But perhaps much of the problem lies in the emphasis on choice itself.

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