



Beyond Women Empowerment

Exploring Perceptions of Women Empowerment among Women and Men in Ukerewe, Tanzania

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Abstract

This thesis is a qualitative case study regarding women empowerment, conducted during a two-month Minor Field Study in the island of Ukerewe, located in Lake Victoria, Tanzania. I aim to explore the term women empowerment through a critical lens whereby I problematize the instrumental understanding of women empowerment. Furthermore, I aim to explore people's conceptions of the actual meaning of empowerment and I herein focus on driving and restraining forces as well as the potential paths to reach women empowerment. The methods employed are open-ended in-depth interviews, focus group discussion and participant observations. The data is analyzed departing from Naila Kabeer's theories of processual women empowerment as in the ability of making active choices depending on agency, resources and achievements. The conclusion drawn from this is that the most constructive and transformative pathways of women empowerment are qualitative aspects such as courage, self-confidence, participation of both sexes as well as social processes of changing traditional culture. My study will be a modest contribution to expanding and developing the concept of women empowerment in the Tanzanian context.

Keywords: women empowerment, gender, agency, qualitative research, instrumental approach to empowerment, male participation

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Table of content

1 Introduction.....	1
1.1 Aim of the study	2
1.2 Research questions.....	3
1.3 Previous research and problem background	3
1.4 Context of the study.....	4
1.5 Disposition.....	5
2 Methodology	6
2.1 A constructivist approach.....	6
2.2 The case study design.....	6
2.3 Methods employed	7
2.3.1 Open-ended interviews	7
2.3.2 Participant observations.....	8
2.3.3 Focus group discussion.....	9
2.4 Key informants	10
2.5 Reflexivity and ethical concerns.....	10
2.6 Quality aspects	11
3 Theoretical framework.....	12
3.1 Agency	12
3.2 Resources	13
3.3 Achievements	13
4 Analysis.....	14
4.1 Participant profiles	14
4.2 Structure of the Analysis	14
4.3 Restraining forces.....	15
4.3.1 Unequal gendered roles	15
4.3.2 Oppressive traditions	16

4.3.3 Fear of deviance	17
4.4 Driving forces.....	18
4.4.1 Courage to defy spouses and community expectations	18
4.4.2 Will to collaborate	19
4.5 Key elements to empowerment.....	20
4.5.1 Opportunities for wage labour.....	20
4.5.2 Political representation	20
4.5.3 Access to education.....	21
4.5.4 Broadened horizons and ‘other realities’	21
4.5.5 Male participation	22
4.5.6 Common struggle for mutual goals	23
4.5.7 Empowerment of the impoverished	24
5 Conclusion	25
5.1 My contribution to the debate and way forward	26
6 References	27
6.1 Internet sources	28
6.2 Other sources	28
7 Appendix.....	29

1 Introduction

Mama Courage - "African women have no power at all."

Frida - "No power at all?!"

Mama Courage - "Yeah, women have many responsibilities but they have no power."

Mama Courage, enouncing the expression above, lives in Ukerewe, the largest island in Lake Victoria, Tanzania. In Tanzania, women are regarded as pillars of society and as the backbone of the family. At the same time women are subdued to oppressive social norms, practices and gender inequality which turns them into underdogs of men. In this sense, they are disempowered as they lack the opportunity to make strategic choices for their own lives. However, as explored in my study, there are perhaps possibilities to turn the situation around.

Women empowerment refers to when women enjoy the same opportunities, rights and possibilities as men, in all aspects of life. In concrete terms it implies that women acquire equal opportunities for economic development through work or individual business opportunities; equal access and rights to education and self-expression as well as equal political representation in national and local government, according to the United Nations Population Fund. (UNFPA 2011)

Women empowerment is often considered to be a powerful driver of sustainable development and the realization of human rights for all. It is widely recognized that education of women, expansion of rights and increased control over financial resources, have positive impacts on reducing infant mortality, improving child health and promoting children's education (UNFPA 2011). Women empowerment and increased gender equality lie at the heart of the development debate and are perceived to create a better starting point in life for generations to come (UNFPA 2011). Improved status of women profits long-term development and the spread of social justice. To 'Promote Gender equality and Empower Women' is goal number three of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), settled by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP 2011). This has contributed to the concept of women empowerment becoming a donor buzzword and an imperative element of policies for development of countries in the Global south. (Parpart 2008:355; UNDP 2011)

The principal elements of MDG 3 can be broken down into three aspects namely; reducing the gender gap in education; expanding women's participation in wage labour; and increasing women's involvement in the political sphere – principally measured through the seats they hold in national parliaments (UNDP 2011; Kabeer 2005:13). These instruments are unquestionably major determinants in improving women's situation but are hardly sufficient to veritably empower women. These aspects can indicate a direction of change but is insufficient to measure empowerment or define the quality of empowerment (Kabeer 2001:52). Furthermore, has a disproportionately optimistic outlook on the effects of education and wage labour. In sum, an all too narrow and universal approach might be counterproductive as real empowerment entails redressing deeply rooted and long-lived power imbalances through cultural and context specific approaches (Kabeer 2001:53; Kabeer 2005:17).

In 2008, prior to conducting this study, I spent eight months in Ukerewe, Tanzania, as a volunteer with a local Non-governmental Organization (NGO). I reflected long and hard on the discrepancies between ambitious international development policies and the actual situation of women and their empowerment process on the ground. These queries motivated me to return to Ukerewe three years later to further explore the people of Ukerewe's perceptions of gender empowerment through a Minor Field Study, resulting in this thesis.

1.1 Aim of the study

My thesis is a qualitative case study using open-ended interviews, focus group discussion and participant observation aiming to explore the concept of women empowerment through a critical lens. I seek to problematize the instrumental approach employed by development agencies and governments. Herein I wish to explore the actual meaning of empowerment to the affected women and men themselves and thereby pinpoint possibilities to expand the concept and make it more viable in the context of the rural community Ukerewe. Furthermore, I seek to understand what women and men consider being the most realistic and appropriating path to empowering women. It has to be noted however, that the concept of women empowerment is complex and requires input from all levels of society; policymakers, civil society and intellectuals. My study focuses on individual and community levels and therefore this study will be a modest contribution to expanding and developing the concept of women empowerment in the Tanzanian context.

1.2 Research questions

- What do women and men perceive to be the *driving* and *restraining* forces of women empowerment?
- In this given context, what are the key elements for women to become more empowered?

1.3 Previous research and problem background

There is unanimous agreement that expanding the rights of women is necessary for development. However, the term empowerment and the paths to get there have been criticized by feminist scholars and especially by non-western feminists (Parpart 2008:354). Western scholars and development policymakers have a tendency to regard women living in the Global South as a monolithic category. Instead of seeing variations and context-specific elements of women's existence worldwide they are reduced to a universal entity in which all women of the Global South are poor, sexually constrained, uneducated, illiterate, family-bound and victimized. In this sense she becomes "*othered*" by western feminists, who in contrast enjoy all privileges of education, rights and autonomy. (Mohanty 2003:33-57) International organizations, NGOs and policymakers have co-opted the concept through which it has lost its transformative edge (ibid). Empowerment has been used in a sense to increase opportunities for women *within* the reigning power structures and *not* as a process to bring about profound social change and justice (ibid). The discussion of its content, theoretical and practical use has become widely researched about (Mosedale 2005:244).

Most of the previous research about women empowerment is made in rural areas in Asia and has a particular focus on education. Medell Annuevo (1995) examines education as a pathway to empowerment having both practical and theoretical implications in the struggle for women being empowered. Malhotra et al, (2002) discuss the importance of education, taking it one step further by exploring social science and health disciplines to get a deeper understanding of women's role in education and gender equality. They claim that education is not sufficient for empowering women and reach gender equality. Rao and Stuart highlight the importance of the transformation of organizations (1997:16). They see this process as the key to reach structural change because they are important ways of mobilizing social energy and setting the agenda for social structures (ibid). Parpart adds that women empowerment is widely used in the development debate despite the concept having vague or differing meanings. However she highlights the need to put pressure on individuals, communities, societies and the international

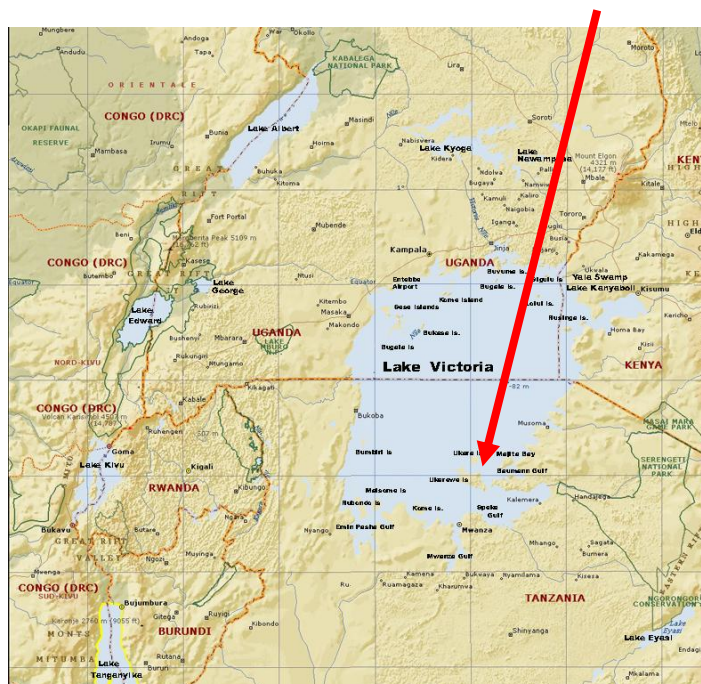
community to transform social structures. (2008:355-58) Lastly, women empowerment, both the mainstream and the more critical approach, tend to focus on women, and is silent on the issues of men's responsibilities and opportunities to participate in the process of eradicating gendered injustices. This is the particular void that I attempt to fill, or at least highlight.

1.4 Context of the study

The study location is northern Tanzania, more specifically the island of Ukerewe, Lake Victoria's largest island. Ukerewe is situated a four hour boat ride from the mainland town Mwanza, Tanzania's third city. The area of the island is about 500sq.km and it has approximately 200,000 inhabitants belonging to three predominant tribes; Kerewe, Kara and Jita. The culture is patrilineal and bride price (dowry paid by grooms to the father of the bride) is widespread. Christianity and Islam are the major religions. Concerning livelihood strategies, the population is largely dependent on subsistence agriculture and fishing. Ukerewe shares many traits with other rural communities in Sub-Saharan Africa and it can therefore be possible to apply my research findings to similar settings. Again, the aim is not to generalize but I hope that my thesis can contribute to a deeper understanding of perceptions of women empowerment in comparable cases. (Ukerewe District Council 2010)

Gender equality is said to be at the heart of Tanzanian strategic plans and development frameworks. It is supposedly mainstreamed across all development sectors with principal focus on access to education, social and economic opportunities as well as the reduction of discrimination. However, there are few concrete actions of how this is really being done. (Ministry of Community Development, Women and Children 2011)

Map 1 of Lake Victoria Region showing Ukerewe



1.5 Disposition

In the next chapter I present my methodology concerns followed by my theoretical framework. The framework draws on Naila Kabeer's notion of women empowerment focusing on pathways to empowerment through agency, resources and achievements. Then I will analyze my findings, linking theoretical concepts to empirical data. The analysis is divided into themes which are seen as central in women empowerment by the respondents. In the final chapter I summarize my findings and reflect upon possible opportunities and directions for future research on women empowerment.

2 Methodology

Firstly I present my ontological and epistemological stance followed by my choice of research design. Thereafter I go through the methods employed and present issues linked to my key informants. In the final section I reflect upon my own position as researcher and ethical concerns related to field work in a country of the Global South.

2.1 A constructivist approach

My research departs from a constructivist inductive research approach meaning that reality is a social construct that is constantly shaped and reshaped by its inhabitants (Mikkelsen 2005:135). As opposed to a positivist approach in which a single, objective reality is believed to exist, constructivist research is grounded in the belief that there is not *one single reality*. Instead the social world is made up of a multitude of alternative realities. (Denscombe 2009:113) The findings in qualitative research are not measured in quantitative terms or generalized to a broader context. Instead, qualitative research aims to explore social phenomena in-depth, in this case women empowerment. (Mikkelsen 2005:136-137)

2.2 The case study design

I am using a case study design since it is suitable for small-scale studies that aim for reaching a profound understanding of social interaction and processes going on in the social setting studied. The case study is principally characterized by the study of a single research entity and attention is given to detail. (Denscombe 2009:60-61) My case, namely individuals that are professionally or voluntarily involved in empowerment concerns in the community of Ukerewe in Tanzania, is a 'natural' setting that exists prior to my research (ibid). I am using an array of different sources and types of data and through combining observed actions and process, informal or formal dictums and official documentation I can acquire a holistic view of the setting. This approach allows me to study the social understanding and process surrounding women empowerment in the community of Ukerewe. It is not a random choice but rather it has been purposefully selected because it has a distinct value as one of the poorer communities in Tanzania where women empowerment is limited. Moreover, the Ukerewe setting is the typical case (Denscombe 2009:65) as it resembles other communities characterized by poverty, limited empowerment and an agricultural-based economy. Therefore, the findings can be transposed to such similar settings. Furthermore, the practical reasons also influenced my selection of the Ukerewe case as I am already familiar with the setting due to previous lengthy sojourns.

2.3 Methods employed

The data collection process lasted two months between January 25th and March 25th and took place in Ukerewe. I employed several different methods that allowed me to study different aspects of social interaction, namely, open-ended interviews, focus group discussions and participant observations (Denscombe 2009:184). In the initial stages of the research process I attempted to use semi-structured interviews but soon discovered that it hindered me from pursuing unexpected leads and directions. After a test interview I altered my approach, especially since my aim was to understand the participants own interpretations and expectations of the concept women empowerment. I selected my participants through snowball sampling. This sampling method implies that research participants can refer you to new participants who can provide essential information on the research topic. (Denscombe 2009:38) As the aim of qualitative research is to explore and understand the social world and not to measure or explain it, the participants are purposefully sampled in virtue of their social or professional roles (ibid).

2.3.1 Open-ended interviews

Open-ended interviews are appropriate for my research since they can provide me with valuable insight on participants' views, opinions, and emotions concerning women empowerment (Denscombe 2009:232-33). The interviews departed from five rather loose themes concerning norms, roles, power, and actions related to empowerment, which I asked the participants to reflect upon. These themes encouraged unanticipated answers and findings that then defined the further data collection. (Denscombe 2005:235)

I conducted 15 open-ended interviews with both women and men, all inhabitants of Ukerewe and somehow involved in empowerment issues. The participants can be grouped into three major categories namely; local government officials for education and development, NGO workers specialized in gender issues; and the typical Ukerewe woman (little education, married and having many children). Interestingly, participant's answers did not differ much even if they had varying levels of education or were living in well-off or poor conditions.

Most interviews lasted an hour and took place in homes of the interviewed and at work places, in rooms where we could stay undisturbed (Denscombe 2009:252). As Tanzania is a hierarchical society characterized by patriarchal norms it is of great value to have male and especially influential male participants. It is interesting to compare their testimonies with less powerful groups, such as women.

All interviews were tape recorded with the consent of the participants and were later transcribed, coded and categorized. I offered all respondents to be anonymous and I later gave them pseudonyms.

During interviews there is an inherent power asymmetry between the researcher and the participant, especially in a developing country context. However, this effect was minimized through; constant reflection upon my role as researcher; critical analysis of participants' answers; and by making the participants feel comfortable by avoiding to judge or criticize their opinions. (Denscombe 2009:244; Scheyvens and Storey 2005:150-51).

The official languages in Tanzania are Kiswahili and English. I used an interpreter when it was needed due to the participant's lack of sufficient skills in English or when I felt that my own Kiswahili skills were insufficient to grasp the complexity of the issue discussed. It is important to keep in mind that the accuracy of translation is not always completely accurate and a third person (the interpreter) brings about an additional step of interpretation. However, misunderstandings were minimal thanks to my own knowledge of Kiswahili and the interpreters' understanding of my research aim. In case the interpreter deviated from the question or answer I could guide him back on track.

The quality of interviews differs largely due to practical reasons such as bad sound quality of recordings. All interviews have been coded and analyzed, but some to a greater extent than others. An interview guide that I used for inspiration in the initial stages of the research process can be found in the appendix.

2.3.2 Participant observations

Participant observation is a good method to gain inside knowledge of participants' social world and gives the researcher valuable insight on behaviour and interactions between social actors. It is also a useful method to study participant's routines with little interference from the researcher. (Denscombe 2009:283) The observations took place in various settings such as in public places – markets, restaurants and during social events. I also participated in NGO and local government meetings as well as in daily activities of local families. My research aim and status was always known and consented to. Such participations can be characterized as being associated with a group rather as being a complete member of it. (Denscombe 2009:284) Having a hidden and complete participation would be impossible due to certain factors as being white and from a Western country. However, prior to this research process I had spent a total amount of eleven months in Ukerewe. During my sojourns I have lived both

with a host family and on my own, all the same in rather primitive conditions. This has of course contributed to my knowledge of the day-to-day life in Ukerewe. I know the community traditions, customs and norms. I have participated in household chores, family meetings, community events. I have also volunteered for a local NGO, which has provided me with useful contact persons/key informants and gatekeepers. It is in this context that I can claim that my participant observations have had minimal inference with the naturalness of the studied setting (Denscombe 2009:284). Furthermore, lengthy immersion in the studied setting is a requisite for ethnographic research and therefore strengthens the credibility of the study (Denscombe 2009:285).

Through these observations it became possible to explore the participants' thoughts, reflections and attitudes towards empowerment. More importantly I was able to observe the behaviour of the participants, which at times diverged from their spoken actions. I took field notes of my observations that I later coded in similar ways as the interviews, looking for recurrent themes, anomalies, and surprising and unexpected results. The participant observations operate as a part of my pre understanding in the analysis.

2.3.3 Focus group discussion

The aim of focus group discussion is to unveil common attitudes towards a certain social phenomenon, in this case women empowerment. It is an interesting manner to study group dynamics and a useful method to understand diverging perceptions between individuals (Denscombe 2009:237-38). The discussion had five participants, three women and two men, all part of a community based organization promoting social entrepreneurship. The theme discussed was women empowerment and the discussion was moderated by me and my interpreter/facilitator who had experience of such methods from his professional life. There can be downsides of using an already existing group in which members already know each other and might have predefined roles (Crang and Cook 2007:91). However, due to time constraints, I estimated that it would be useful to have individuals who knew each other as no time had to be wasted for breaking the ice, and therefore organizing the discussion was far easier (Denscombe 2009:243).

This particular group had been selected with help from my key informant/interpreter. One of the challenges encountered using this method was the differing levels of involvement of individuals. Some were too active, others too passive and there was also a risk that participants tended to agree with the strongest opinion maker of the group (Denscombe

2009:254). The most interesting aspect however, was to study the social consensus or divergence on the topic discussed.

2.4 Key informants

To facilitate access, I relied on my friend and key informant Musiba Kakulu who is a teacher and heavily involved in local development issues. As a key informant he smoothed and sped up the process of creating a relation of trust with the research participants (Scheyvens and Storey 2005:131). He also served as my interpreter. Nevertheless, some might have objections to why I employed a male when discussing empowerment with women. Women might have felt uncomfortable discussing these matters with a man and might therefore have withheld information. It's difficult to say what effect he had on the participant's answers but I considered that he was an enormous asset to my study. We know each other well, discussed the topic and my reflections at length and I am convinced that he established a good relation with the participants. What is more, living with him and his family enabled us to constantly reflect and discuss interview findings and such. As he is a well-known person in Ukerewe among people concerned with development issues, he was also able to put me in contact with a variety of groups of people ranging from government officials to poor women and marginalized men.

Another person that was of enormous value to me was a Sophia Donald, working for the local *Forum Syd* office who helped me identify suitable participants, supported, and supervised me. Forum Syd is a large Swedish NGO working with development issues across the globe.

2.5 Reflexivity and ethical concerns

As an interviewer I could never completely rid myself of preconceived ideas, academic adherence and values. It is crucial to acknowledge that my personality influenced the research participants. At the same time they also carried their own baggage along and together we formed the research process. (Denscombe 2009:245) The findings are thus interpretations and not exact accounts of the social reality studied. I have a humble awareness of my position as an "outsider". Undesirably, but yet unavoidably, this shaped my interpretations in different ways. The social reality that I studied did not exist regardless of me but rather it emerged through my interactions with the participants.

Being a white, Western, young, and female researcher was also an element that influenced the research process. As a woman in a patriarchal culture it was at times difficult to express my

views and to convey my message. In a society where women do not question men, awkward situations can arise between the researcher and the research participants. Therefore, having a male chaperone as my key informant proved very useful in these situations since he could mediate the process. Moreover, as a white person I represented money and I assume participants at times expected to receive money in exchange for the interview. However, I made clear at the outset that participation did not entail economic compensation. (Sjöberg 2008:32; Crang and Cook 2007:27)

One aspect that was particularly delicate in terms of reflexivity is the preconception that I shared the same opinions and views on women empowerment as the female participants. However, I soon realized that this was hardly the case. I had to bear in mind not to try and impose my views on them. To conclude, to constantly critically reflect upon one's own role will mitigate tendencies to 'westernize' the research. Moreover, respect for local values and culture permeates my study. This is a critical ethical concern while doing research in a developing country context (Scheyvens and Storey 2005:140).

Prior to starting the research, informed consent was given by all participants. I explained the research aim and process, that no economic compensation was involved, that they could pull out at any time, and that they were allowed to stay anonymous. I also explained that they were going to be given a copy of my thesis once finished. (Scheyvens and Storey 2005:142-43)

2.6 Quality aspects

The authenticity and reliability of the study are strengthened by my repeated and lengthy sojourns in the community. Furthermore, as I discussed the research process with my key informants I was able to test my hunches and findings on them. They were then able to justify if my interpretations actually mirrored the opinions and views of the community. (Crang and Cook 2007:149).

3 Theoretical framework

The Bangladeshi scholar, Naila Kabeer is a renowned social economist, active in the field of gender and development. Her definition of empowerment is the following: "*The expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them.*" (2001)

Naila Kabeer, expands the concept of women empowerment by adding the notion of the ability to make choices. Disempowerment, as opposed to empowerment, entails the absence of the ability to make choices. Hence, empowerment refers to the process in which previously disempowered individuals are given the ability to make strategic choices over their own life. What is more, being powerful is not equal to empowerment as the latter refers to a process of fundamental change. (Kabeer 2005:13-14) The notion of choice is further problematized by adding layers attributed to the *existence of alternatives choices* and the ability to affirm and *see these alternatives as real and valid for one to act upon.* (Kabeer 2005:14) Kabeer explores the concept of empowerment through three closely intertwined dimensions, namely, agency, resources and achievements.

3.1 Agency

Agency is an intrinsic dimension of empowerment and refers to the process in which choices are made and put into practice (Kabeer 2005:14). Kabeer explores two notions of agency; positive and negative agency. Positive agency, translated into '*power to*' implies making and acting upon one's own choices despite opposition from others. Negative agency or '*power over*' entails that certain actors overrule the agency of others. This can be exemplified through oppression and the use of violence. (Kabeer 2005:14) However, agency does not exist in a social vacuum; rather structures such as norms, customs and institutional frameworks can dictate that injustices are inexistent or that they in fact are not even unfair or oppressive. These structures are often internalised by the marginalised or subordinate group, implying that overthrowing structures is impossible or that resistance to these could jeopardize one's social and personal situation. (Kabeer 2005:14) In this light, agency is not solely about making active and informed choices but that these actions should actively defy structures and imbalance of power. The acquirement of agency departs from an internal process, grounded in values and beliefs and motifs for action. The concept is linked to how individuals perceive themselves but also to how society at large perceives individuals. (Kabeer 2005:15)

3.2 Resources

Resources refers to means through which agency is put into effect (Kabeer 2005:14). Resources are not defined in an economic term; instead they are interpreted as privileges or capacities for decision-making. These resources are unevenly distributed across layers of society – from political to local elites, organisations and families. Leaders or powerful individuals can use their resources since they possess the authority to make choices. In contrast, individuals who are dispossessed of resources due to their inferior position have limited ability to make choices or be involved in strategic decision-making. (Kabeer 2005:14)

3.3 Achievements

Achievements are the result of agency, in other terms the capability of individuals to lead a meaningful life. Hereby, achievements imply to what extent individuals fail or succeed to realise their choices or visions of a life they value. (Kabeer 2005:15) In the mainstream discussion on empowerment such achievements could refer to the access and completion of education. However, this conventional view fails to account for if education has lead to greater sense of autonomy. Thus, achievements have to be understood in a broader sense that expands individuals' ability to make strategic life choices geared towards social change and not only mere survival. (Kabeer 2005:15)

As aforementioned, the three concepts of agency, resources and achievements intersect. Agency can be understood as 'passive and effective' or 'active and transformative'. The former refers to actions taken within tight restrictions and situations of limited leeway and in accordance with expectations, responsibilities and norms. The latter relates to purposeful behaviour that challenges rules and restrictions and leads to social change. (Kabeer 2005:15) Ultimately, women empowerment shall entail not only access to wage labour, education and political representation but more importantly to the ability to make strategic life choices of how one wants to live. In many ways, education and wage labour have positive effects on women's ability to make choices but at times they may fail to have a transformative power.

Moving on to the analysis, I will carry along the concepts discussed above and link them to the views, actions and ideas of my research participants.

4 Analysis

4.1 Participant profiles

The participants are grouped into three major categories. In Tanzania, women are referred to as Mama and men as Baba, often followed by the name of their firstborn or sometimes describing a role, profession or a trait. I have given them pseudonyms departing from this approach.

- Local government officials for education and development – These participants have higher education and are involved in issues of women empowerment on the government level. They are called: Mama School, Baba Education, Mama Discipline, and Baba Development.
- NGO workers specialized in gender issues – Some of these participants hold a higher degree of education and the group includes both voluntarily and paid workers. They are called: Baba NGO, Miss Equality, Baba Orphan, Baba Teacher, Mama Messiah, and Mama CBO¹.
- Typical Ukerewe woman – Most of these participants have little education, many children and lives in poor albeit varied conditions. They are called: Mama Courage, Mama Brewery, Mama Bar Owner, and Mama Religion.

4.2 Structure of the Analysis

I have structured my analysis departing from the ideas put forward in my research questions and as interpreted by the research participants. Firstly, I will explore the restraining forces to empowerment, namely; oppressive traditions; unequal gender roles and the fear of deviance. Secondly, I will delve into the driving forces namely; the courage to defy spouses and community expectations as well as the will to collaborate. In the final section of the analysis, I will pin down key elements inherent to the empowerment process such as; instrumental entitlements; broadened horizons; male participation; common struggle for mutual goals and empowerment of the impoverished.

¹ CBO stands for community based organization

4.3 Restraining forces

4.3.1 Unequal gendered roles

Women perform most work, reproductive and productive related to agriculture. Men's responsibilities primarily focus on providing a household income and they are largely excluded from all household chores. This is illustrated by the quotes below.

“A pregnant woman works from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. in her *shamba* [plot of land/garden]². Coming back, she collects firewood that she carries on her head and she carries a baby on her back. Her husband walks beside her without helping her. When she comes home she prepares food and fetches water from the well. Her husband is only waiting for the preparation of the food. He is only waiting for her [to finish her work].” Mama Courage 2011-02-05

“Men in Ukerewe go fishing, when they return they do not like to work. Most work is for women and children.” Mama Courage 2011-02-05

Participants recognize that women hold a central role in Tanzanian society. Women are regarded as the pillars of society and as being key persons in the development process. Especially male participants in my study expressed such views, which could be an externalization of an implicit perceived superiority of women over men. This superiority should somehow disguise oppression of women.

“Women are the most important persons of society, and if you educate a woman you educate a whole society. Even when chiefs have problems they turn to mother for advice – without mother's ideas men cannot do anything”
Baba NGO 2011-02-20

This “negative glorification” of women is frequently expressed by some of the female participants, in particular those with educational degrees. They regard it as a strategy to justify women's inferior status to men. By claiming that women are pillars of society, engaged and responsible for the most central aspects of Tanzanian culture - the family - men attempt to minimize the injustices that women endure. In this way, men victimize themselves by claiming that they feel excluded from the domestic sphere and that they suffer as they have little power or insight in to these female realm. Men in my study also expressed that they do not want to interfere with their wives work as she might then feel even more disempowered.

² My comments and clarifications are added in brackets.

Hence, they justify and reiterate the reigning power imbalance between women and men. For instance, Baba NGO claims that he does not wish to impinge on his wife's work as she takes such pride in performing it. By sharing household burdens he will encroach on her power.

In sum, despite government efforts, however limited, little has changed since Julius Nyerere (first president of Tanzania) in 1967 enounced the following:

“Women who live in villages work harder than anyone else in Tanzania. At the same time, men in villages are on holiday half of their lives. The power and energy that millions of men in the villages squander on gossip, dancing and drinking is a great treasure that they could have given to the development of their country.” (Nyerere 1969:30)

4.3.2 Oppressive traditions

“In the past, according to traditional customs women were regarded as tools to refresh and entertain men.” Focus group discussant, man 2011-01-27

Traditional norms and traditions are the greatest hinders for women empowerment and social transformation stated by the participants who constantly blame gender inequality on ancestral beliefs and practices that perpetuate the inferiority of women. Such claims are illustrated in the quotes below and above and are frequent in the majority of interviews.

“There is still a problem in believing in traditional culture. People believe that women do not have the same abilities and capabilities as men, women are still under men's control all the time.” Baba Orphant 2011-03-15

“There is still a culture of women fearing their husbands who still believe that they don't have the right to participate in making decisions of their families. Women who demand equal rights may be threatened, chased away or divorced by their husbands. So this is still a challenge in society.” Mama Bar owner 2011-03-02

All the same, it seems to be difficult to actually pinpoint what kind of traditions making out the threat to women empowerment. This can be explained along the lines of Bourdieu's concept of *doxa*. This implies that elements of traditional culture are taken for granted and have become naturalized. These are almost impossible to pinpoint, exemplify or explain, and therefore, are extremely difficult to question or change. (Kabeer 2001:25) In my study I experience the power of *doxa* through never being able to discuss in-depth the actual practices or traditions that stand in the way for empowerment. Perhaps, this is also a manner in which

customs detrimental to women's empowerment remain in practice whereby the status quo is maintained.

According to many participants, to overcome these negative structures, women and men should participate in trainings that will transform individual actions and thereby challenge power structures. Trainings can undo traditional constraints and 'resocialize' individuals into gender aware citizens as Mama CBO describes below.

"Changes will be obtained by having various training in groups. The training should be in human rights and leaving bad cultural customs and let the men participate in normal daily activities in the family. This will bring development." Mama CBO, 2011-03-10

It is extremely difficult to pinpoint how traditions can be altered but in this context the most influential actor seem to be religious institutions. Religion plays an extremely important role in Tanzanians' lives and a vast majority of the population is Christian. Religious leaders have power and are seldom questioned or criticized. If they can convey messages of gender equality these would not only reach out to all social layers but would also have the potential to actually be applied in practice. One obstacle to this approach however, is the huge variety of Christian denominations ranging from Catholicism, Protestantism, Seventh Day Adventists, Assemblies of God, Jehovah's Witnesses or traditional African beliefs (Ukerewe District Council 2010). These are more or less open to change whereby societal differences and inequalities could change among some, whereas others become even more retrogressive, since change is a threat to their *raison d'être*.

"Religious people in the churches must preach about women empowerment to remove bad traditional behavior of not allowing women to make decisions in their families or in society". Focus group discussant, woman 2011-01-27

4.3.3 Fear of deviance

A collectivist culture characterizes Tanzanian society, perhaps with roots dating back to the Nyerere era and the idea of African Socialism (Nyerere 1969). Like many collectivist societies, social control is high and the deviation and anomalies are heavily sanctioned (Boglund 2007:28). This element was frequently referred to among my research participants. The fear of being abnormal and acting in opposition to common expectations and norms was widespread and it was thought that acting against traditions and norms leads to gossip, rumors

or even social exclusion – a fatal blow to the collective identity. Dread of being an outsider considerably exceeded the fear of being oppressed within the household and sanctions from the community were considered far worse than domestic violence or spouse coercion. One participant explained that if you fail to follow traditions and norms, one becomes scared of community repercussions. Such claims are clearly exemplified by quotes like the following:

“Certain families have already understood, a woman can wash the clothes and the man can wash the clothes. When a society sees that this man is now helping his wife to clean the house people think that there is something wrong. There is still a bad cultural believing that these activities are for women only. All these are bad traditions and customs.” Mama School 2011-02-07

“I stayed with the children’s father, we separated three years ago. But when we were together we were cooking together with the father. Though, people did not accept that. Our visitors, especially his relatives, they found out he was cooking, he was washing plates and they said I under graded him, they didn’t like me.” Mama School 2011-02-07

Not only does deviant behavior lead to community sanctions but can also trigger even more intra-household oppression. Increased female influence over family budget, chores and decision-making challenging norms and traditional gender roles can undermine the sense of masculinity. (Kabeer 2001:52)

4.4 Driving forces

4.4.1 Courage to defy spouses and community expectations

Courage to challenge norms and customs can also have a releasing effect, not only for the individuals directly involved but also for the community at large. This is explained as a ‘domino effect’, or the imitation of positive role models. One of the female participants demonstrates this effect. She taught her sons to perform chores that were commonly seen as women’s work. In the beginning, she experienced plenty of malice from the community but through persistence and perseverance, sticking to her ideal of sharing the burdens of household work, she realized that community members slowly started to imitate her behavior. Her fellow community members regarded her as a source of inspiration which in turn resulted in personal satisfaction on her behalf of having converted others.

I can clearly discern the various forms of agency that Kabeer refers to in her empowerment concept. Those who fear sanctions and prefer the status quo, show obvious traits of passive and efficient agency as they act within predefined constraints that are perceived as difficult or impossible to change. Moreover, they fear the social costs that refusing socially expected behaviors may have. In contrast, having the courage to raise one's voice is related to notion of active and transformative agency. Despite community sanctions, rules and regulations are challenged even if the cost is social exclusion. Needless to say it is the latter form that results in social transformation. To conclude, all participants claim that courage is a vital element for women empowerment; however, they seem more or less prone to act upon courage. This could be an expression of the amount of resources the different participants possess. Those women who are involved in wage labour and have some level of education have stronger vantage points and authority, i.e. what Kabeer refers to as resources (2001:14) to make such claims in relation to their husbands.

4.4.2 Will to collaborate

The participants claim that regarding women and men as two widely different beings, belonging to different spheres and performing different types of work and having different responsibilities is one of the reasons to the gender imbalance in Ukerewe. Instead, by including each other in one's own private male or female sphere can be a positive path towards empowerment and increased gender equality. By gaining insight in each other's roles and understanding both negative and positive consequences of the distinct separation of spheres can lead to empowerment of women and social transformation. Mama School explains that when she is visiting schools in her work she tries to inspire the teachers to get the boys to work too and not only the girls.

“I can tell, the boys were so happy. Boys do like working too. When you are in a group you feel happy.” Mama School 2011-02-07

”I would like to do even small activities like cooking but according to the tradition and the culture, if I cook, my wife doesn't feel good in this act because of the traditions and culture.” Baba NGO 2011-02-20

It is evident that women and men are afraid of letting the other into their own private sphere as they fear that their own specific and niche power will be undermined. It is easier to stick to one's current position and thereby not jeopardize the power one already has. The fear of the unknown seems to be far too strong.

Participants, who share their experience of the community's reluctance to change, claim that this resentment is rooted in the perception of undermining masculinity. Such behaviour is common among both sexes, but surprisingly even more so among women. This can be related to the notion of the subordinate subject's internalization of an inferior status. Marginalized groups can be blind to injustice and it can be seen as the natural state of things and is therefore not even questioned. (Kabeer 2001:24)

4.5 Key elements to empowerment

4.5.1 Opportunities for wage labour

Most women also mention greater access to income generating activities as an instrument to increase their negotiating power within the household. But at the same time they acknowledge that additional power over family budget can cause domestic conflict. In Ukerewe which is a largely agrarian society where women hold the principal responsibility for agricultural production and the few women who are engaged in wage labor do so in traditionally female connoted professions such as nursing, sewing or as market vendors. These women, despite their professional role still have a high work load within the domestic sphere contributing to their 'double workday' and thereby intensifying their workload. The workload within the domestic sphere does not necessarily diminish with wage labour and this does not always contribute to women empowerment. However the women in my study claim that sharing the burden of domestic work is therefore crucial to enhance gender equality.

4.5.2 Political representation

Political representation is one of the three indicators for women empowerment stated in the MDG's. In Tanzania the government reserves seats for women. Mama Leader says:

“Many women are now allowed to participate in politics and various institutions such as Non Governmental Organizations and in the Governments, regardless that they are women. Many District Officers today are women.” Mama Leader 2011-03-18

However this quota is a token for female political participation as most women come from social elites (Kabeer 2005:21). This token value does not necessarily mean that women have political power or that they share values with women in rural remote and poor regions, far from the capital (Kabeer 2005:23-24).

4.5.3 Access to education

In the instrumental approach, education is considered the path *per excellence* to women's empowerment. Through education women gain greater knowledge about their rights; can attain information on health issues; have greater chances of finding work in the non-agricultural sector; can earn her own income and thereby strengthen her negotiation power within the household. (Kabeer 2005) In brief, education is a manner to escape the poverty trap.

Education and wage labor can of course strengthen women's agency and resources but are not perceived as an end in itself. Furthermore, in order to reap the fruits of education and wage labor women and men must have a certain level of agency and resources to act to transform society. Furthermore, a coerced change, imposed by Western and individualistic values, is counterproductive as it can spur further gender imbalances. What is more, an uncritical glorification of education or wage labor can even perpetuate disempowerment and social inequalities if the educational system continues to preach gender biased practices and values and if women are stuck in gender connoted work or work that is detrimental to health and negotiating power. (Kabeer 2005:17; Parpart 2008:56)

4.5.4 Broadened horizons and 'other realities'

However, Kabeer retorts that, according to the instrumental approach, education is a panacea for empowerment and its potential limitations are neglected (2005:17). For instance, the content of education is never questioned or viewed critically. The education system, especially the lower levels, is an important socialization institution. Unfortunately, traditional norms and values continue to permeate the system. In many African countries teachers' attitudes toward boys and girls differ on the basis that "boys need careers and girls need husbands" (Kabeer 2005:17). Such conceptions reiterate girls perceived inferior status, lack of self-confidence and low ambitions. Hence, patriarchal structures are maintained. (Kabeer 2005:17) This view is strengthened by findings in my own study through participant comments such as:

"The problem with education is that in schools they [teachers] still stick to old cultures and norms." Mama School 2011-02-07

"The curriculum [in Tanzanian schools] is old and needs to be changed because they still teach old traditions." Baba NGO 2011-02-20

“School is the way to overcome fear, growing up and knowing about equality. Therefore curricula need changes. You put it [gender equality norms] in the curriculum and then they [teachers] have to teach it whether they like it or not.” Mama School 2011-02-07

In addition to refreshing educational curricula, other participants stress the importance of discovering new and alternative realities. They claim that broadening one’s horizon and opening one’s mind to other communities is a crucial step towards empowering people and creating a more equal society. This notion is put forward in comments like the following:

“Moving from one place to another, to acquire different skills from other people, I think that is another reason [for equal gender relations]. Because let’s say a woman or a man was born at Ukerewe and have never moved from here and haven’t got the chance to see what other people are doing. I think once you get the chance to go even to Mwanza [the nearest major town, and Tanzania’s third City], maybe s/he can see how other people live there and learn from that. And when s/he gets back to Ukerewe, s/he can tell everybody that s/he has learnt new things.” Miss Equality 2011-02-21

In my study, education is viewed as an instrument to work in the direction towards empowerment. However, quality and the content of education often escape the critical lens of scrutiny from policy makers and intellectuals. Nevertheless, my research participants have a pragmatic approach of how new understandings can be acquired outside of the formal educational system. To conclude, the research participants demonstrate agency by working around the formal and often oppressive structures of society and finding alternative paths to changing mindsets.

4.5.5 Male participation

Men are strikingly absent in the empowerment literature. Empowerment, both in the instrumental sense and the broader sense as understood by Kabeer, disregard the importance of male participation. Men are not mentioned in regards to either empowerment entitlements such as access to education or the empowerment process illustrated by agency, resources and achievements.

In the initial stages of the research process, I was of the same idea, namely that in order for women empowerment to take place, women need to awaken, claim their rights and revolt, or at least confront the patriarchal structures that constrain them. Conversely, I realized that several of the research participants held a completely different opinion. In order to empower

women and reduce gender inequalities and other social injustices women *and* men need to participate in the process. Furthermore, many of the participants claimed that exclusive focus on women can spur antagonism among men and women and thereby impede the empowerment process. Most importantly, a unilateral approach, through which women are provided with more opportunities, hinders social transformation as men will not have to alter their behaviour. In sum, the achievement of women empowerment is naught.

Women in Ukerewe have an inferior status to men, are victims of various forms of oppression and have fewer opportunities than men to realize their self potential. Therefore, increasing opportunities and efforts to improve their sort is called for. However, if this departs from an individualistic and Western approach the empowerment project can become counterproductive (Kabeer 2001:51). The participants stress the importance of seeing empowerment as a joint venture, including both women and men, benefitting both parties. Resistance and rivalry does not lead to more equal gender roles!

4.5.6 Common struggle for mutual goals

The term empowerment has to be placed in the specific context that is under scrutiny. Tanzania is a collective society in which individual's ambitions for independence and self-realization is inferior to the collective project of development. Therefore empowerment must imply a process in which men and women struggle together to achieve common goals. Through a Western lens this can be interpreted as women being too self-sacrificing and self-effacing. By reducing such traits women will become more empowered as they will focus on their individual rights rather than the well-being of her children and husband. However, such attitudes spring from Western ideals failing to ignore the centrality of families in many African societies. As the concept has become the 'motherword' of all international organizations there is somewhere an implicit idea that empowerment of women in the Global South must follow the same path as it did in the Global North. (Parpart 2008)

Men and women in my study repeatedly state the importance of working together to achieve common goals. Working together refers to various different constellations such as between spouses, between parents and children, between teachers and children, between women and men in the community and between communities. This sense of togetherness permeates social life and relations and it is unthinkable to commence an empowerment project that deviates from this ideal. For instance, empowerment leading to separation of spouses is neither socially

accepted nor desired, rather, spouses maintain marriages on the grounds of ‘co-operative conflict’ (Kabeer 2001:52). This idea is reflected in my data.

“If we want to empower women we should also empower men. They together know what changes are now coming in the community. But if we deal only with women and leave men alone, it will end up in chaos. Fight and war.” Mama School 2011-02-07

4.5.7 Empowerment of the impoverished

Ukerewe is one of the poorer regions in Tanzania. Subsistence farming and fishing are the two principal livelihood strategies. The former is mainly practiced by women and the latter is exclusively practiced by men. Arable land is limited and land degradation and nutrient depletion of soils is abundant. The remote location adds on to the vulnerability of the Ukerewe community. The prevalence of HIV is considerably higher than the national average, largely due to mobile fishing communities, lack of education/information and the absence of sufficient medical care and access to retro-viral therapy. Primary school enrolment is generally low both for boys and girls and only a minority continues to secondary school (Ukerewe District Council 2010). In sum, Ukerewe society holds many traits of the most impoverished communities in the Global South. In this context, women *and* men are vulnerable and marginalized. Evidently, women are disempowered in relation to men, however, it is comprehensible that the research participants advocate for development and social justice for both sexes. Men’s situation is nonetheless characterized by limited access to education, absence of economically viable livelihood strategies, lack of political and civil rights as well as self-confidence and autonomy. Furthermore, men are constrained by social structures such as expectations and attitudes towards masculinity. Similar to women, they fear being regarded as abnormal or outsiders in the community. Participants constantly claim that female and male empowerment, is necessary for sound future economic, social and cultural development and social transformation.

5 Conclusion

Grounded in the participants perceptions I have explored the restraining and driving forces surrounding the concept of women empowerment. My analysis points out that the instrumental aspects are less vital to women empowerment than agency driven aspects such as courage, self-confidence, mutual participation and social processes of changing traditional culture. In order for social change to take place and empowerment to be achieved (in the Kabeerian sense), individuals must acknowledge and act upon a range of alternative choices on how they want to lead their lives. Thus, both women and men have to make use of active and transformative agency. Rather than operating within the status quo individuals must constantly defy and challenge oppressive structures. Notably the following elements; refusal of spouse dominance, disregard of community malice; and the invitation of the opposite sex into one's own gendered sphere; can be catalysts for women empowerment. In contrast, despite instrumental entitlements, if individuals choose to operate within the reigning social order (passive and effective agency) by reproducing traditional gender patterns and fearing social exclusion profound social change will be impossible and empowerment will thus never have far-reaching positive effects. Thus, the agency of individuals will have limited achievements, meaning that they might not live the life that they truly value (Kabeer 2005:15).

In absence of education, individuals aspire to engage in informal processes to educate themselves through travel and interactions with other communities, tribes and cultures. Through such actions new ideas and values can contribute to a change of mindset. However, women empowerment is often discussed in terms of togetherness, implying that women and men take part in a joint venture to transform cultural norms and practices. The reason for this is often their perception that the majority of the Ukerewe inhabitants are disempowered and lack basic education, adequate livelihoods, have limited notions of their rights, and live in a remote and neglected region of Tanzania. However, one has to emphasize that in a marginalized and vulnerable community, women are far more vulnerable and exposed to inequalities and injustices. By too much focus on togetherness, one might risk to once again lose sight of women and thereby contribute to deepened disempowerment. In sum, instrumental entitlements are necessary given that they are combined with broadened horizons, male participation, empowerment of the impoverished, all rooted in the vision that

empowerment should be a common struggle, benefitting both women and men. Otherwise the achievements of women empowerment are limited.

5.1 My contribution to the debate and way forward

Kabeer stresses the importance of increasing women's positive agency i.e. increasing the power to make own choices despite social pressure. However, I am wondering if influential men can direct negative agency (*'power over'*) towards fellow men in order to influence and inspire them to strive for gender equality. In order to test the viability of this theoretical expansion, further ethnographic research with men is called for. This can be seen as a window for future research. According to the research participants, especially religious leaders and male teachers can be agents of change as they have the agency and the resources to reach out to large and varieties of groups on different levels of society. Perhaps this can be an interesting angle of exploring the implications of women empowerment.

The aim of my research was to study individual and community perceptions of women empowerment and puts little focus on institutional political and legal levels. This does not imply that I overlook or disregard their importance but rather that the scope of such a study is far beyond the reach of this one. Finally, I bear in mind that grass-root and political levels must work in tandem to make change happen.

So to conclude; is there a panacea for reaching increased gender equality? As it seems, a universal approach to women empowerment is unfruitful or even counterproductive as the concept of empowerment has differing meanings to individuals, communities and societies in which the concept operates. My study does not dictate the single path to women empowerment but I might have provided a clue of which direction to choose. In sum, women empowerment is process-oriented and has to be innovative and tailor-made to meet specific local social patterns and needs.

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7 Appendix

Interview

Tell me about yourself!

How do you understand the term empowerment? Can you explain please!

Norms and roles of women in your society

What are the norms for women and men in this society?

What is it that makes these roles still existing and ongoing?

Do you make them still exist? If yes, how? If no, how?

Are you scared of what could happen if you don't stick to the norms? If yes, why? If no, why?

Power

In what areas do women have power in daily life in your society? (what are they responsible for?)

In what areas do men have power in daily life in your society? (what are they responsible for?)

Actions

What are the main reasons that hinder the development of women to get more empowered?

What do you think is the key to get women more empowered?

Who do you think has the power over women's empowerment?

What do you think that you as an individual can do to get more empowered?

Existing reality of women empowerment

Visions of women empowerment

Possibilities for women empowerment

Problems and hinders for women empowerment

Concrete measures of what to do to develop your society connected to the situation for women in the society