

# To Stand on Her Own Two Feet: Women Empowerment at the Grassroots in Delhi

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ASIA IN FOCUS

The essay explores what the ubiquitous concept of (women) empowerment looks like in a state-civil society partnership development programme in Delhi at the grassroots level. The Mission Convergence Programme (MCP) was initiated in 2008, at a time when ambitions of transforming Delhi into a world-class city ran rampant through the governing bodies. Neoliberal ideals and targets have influenced urban governance in Delhi, and this essay sheds light on how this might affect social security projects aimed at the population of female urban poor. I achieve this by conceptualising the term empowerment, both on the global stage as well as in the Indian context, and then elucidate the Mission Convergence Programme and how it was received and used by the target group, namely urban poor women. Using data from of a qualitative study carried out in 2012, I find that the realities of daily life, gender roles and societal values affect the implementation of empowerment objectives in development programmes in Delhi.

**Keywords:** Urban poor, empowerment, public services, Mission Convergence Programme, governance, gender and development, Delhi, India, neoliberalism, gender dynamics

Indian development thinking and praxis have closely followed changing global paradigms of development. The contemporary developmental thinking in India is as such an integrated part of the global discourse, not least because of multilateral and intergovernmental developmental funding (Prakash, 2013, 29). Women empowerment, especially, has become both a means and an end within global and national development initiatives.

Globalisation, combined with neoliberalism, has led to a rapid change in urban Indian society, not least for women. They participate in the workforce to a greater extent, and gender roles and ideals are shifting as they are influenced by different practices from around the world. This is especially true for members of the diverse and growing middle class, but what about urban poor women?

The aspirations to transform Delhi into a 'global city' came as a result of the economic liberalisation that started in the 1990s, as well as a changing culture of consumption (Ramakrishnan, 2013). This transformation has not included all the inhabitants in the city. The emergence of a growing middle class identity has influenced urban governance and development, which has resulted in socio-spatial trends whereby the urban poor and working class are being removed from public space (Ramakrishnan, 2013, 101). However, the Indian state is legitimised in part because of its welfare system, and the urban poor and working class constitute a proportion of the electorate that the state cannot ignore.

Thus, the state must mediate between its neoliberal aspirations and its responsibilities towards its vulnerable citizens by introducing new techniques of governance and development initiatives that are aimed at the urban poor. I argue that urban poor women in Delhi experience changes that pertain to globalisation and are influenced by neoliberal ideals, and that they have increasingly become the 'ideal beneficiaries' for a plethora of national and international development projects based on a constructed notion of the 'Urban Poor Woman'.

The Mission Convergence Programme (MCP) was a government initiated, internationally acclaimed 'good governance' social security project that was implemented in collaboration with over one hundred non-governmental organisations (NGOs) across Delhi. It aimed to radically change the way the government related to the 'vulnerable population' and vice versa, by placing Gender Resource Centres - Suvudha Kendr (GRC-SKs) in the low-income areas of the city. The MCP adopted the classic development myth that poor women are the best agents to lift their families and communities out of poverty (Dhanju, 2011, 72). It thus maintained an explicit focus on 'women empowerment' throughout its objectives, and largely conflated 'gender' with women in its activities.

Drawing on Naila Kabear's conceptualisation of empowerment (2001), this article explores how notions of women empowerment in the MCP might be interpreted and utilised by the MCP and its target

group, urban poor women. The article is based on fieldwork conducted in 2012 for my Masters' thesis 'Poor subjects or empowered citizens? Perspectives on rights and public service delivery among female urban poor in Delhi' that I submitted to the University of Oslo in 2013. During my fieldwork, I conducted eighteen semi-structured interviews with various actors involved in the MCP; twelve interviews with fourteen women from the target group living in low income areas, which included both women who were using the GRC-SK and women who were not; four interviews with GRC-SK employees from the nongovernmental sector; and two interviews with government officials from the central and district level of the MCP. In addition, I engaged in participatory observation in meetings, events, and the everyday operation of the center, and had informal talks with a wide range of actors. All names in the article are pseudonyms, to ensure the informants' anonymity.

In the next section I discuss the term 'empowerment' in the global development discourse and the Indian context, and then I turn to the MCP and its place in a postcolonial megacity that is governed increasingly through neoliberal ideals. Further, I discuss how the empowerment objectives of the MCP function at the grassroots level in their interaction with prevailing gender norms and societal values.

### **The 'empowerment' turn in development**

The 1970s were characterised by the increasing visibility of women's issues, feminism and the situation of women in development worldwide. The first UN Conference for Women was held in Mexico in 1975, with the UN decade for Women following directly after (Waldrop and Nielsen, 2014, 3). In India, the landmark report by the Committee on the Status of Women in India was published in 1974, which resulted in the social and political realities of Indian women being put on the political and legislative agenda throughout the 1980s and 90s. The report revealed that even though Indian women had equal rights on

paper, the reality was different, especially regarding matters such as inheritance, political participation, health, workforce participation and education (Waldrop and Nielsen, 2014, 3). The situation for many women in India remains unequal, even though governments and NGOs are seeking to rectify this through various social security measures explicitly targeted towards women.

According to Aradhana Sharma (2008, 2), feminists working in development have played a significant role in globalising the concept of 'empowerment' as a favored strategy for promoting gender-equal and just development. Their ideas have since been re-inflected, appropriated and operationalised by international agencies such as the United Nations (UN) and the World Bank. Thus, as Sharma states, empowerment is not a transnational discourse that is applied to national or local realities; rather, the prevailing mainstream global discourse on empowerment is an effect and assemblage of several transnational circulations of empowerment ideas (Sharma, 2008, 2).

Even though 'empowerment' has reached an almost hegemonic status within international development discourse, it is not easily defined. Naila Kabeer (2001) offers a useful definition: Empowerment is the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied them. Kabeer makes a distinction between first and second order choices. Strategic life choices are the former, choices that have a greater significance for people's lives as they constitute its defining parameters. The latter, second order choices, might affect the quality of people's lives, but are less consequential (Kabeer, 2001, 19). The distribution of power is central to Kabeer's definition, and empowerment entails a process of change from being disempowered to being empowered. As empowerment is an explicit target for the MCP, it is interesting to look at how it might enable such a process.

According to Harriss, there is another, neoliberal conceptualisation of empowerment we could

consider a fundamental theme of the governmentality of the post-liberalisation state in India (Harriss, 2007, 2716). The World Bank, who once defined empowerment as '(...) the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives' (World Bank, 2002, cited in Harriss, 2007, 2716), has revised its definition of empowerment to one that corresponds more with neoliberal ideals: 'Empowerment is the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform these choices into desired actions and outcomes.' (World Bank Poverty Net Website, 2007, cited in Harriss, 2007).

In comparing Kabeer's definition with the World Bank's definition in 2007, there is a shift in focus away from the distribution of power and towards increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to choose, which depoliticises the concept of 'empowerment'. Further, the contents have shifted towards neoliberal governance ideals. According to Sharma, empowerment initiatives help facilitate the neoliberal ideals of small and good government. As such, empowerment initiatives may allow post-colonial, developmentalist states like India to downsize their welfare bureaucracies and redistributive role by educating individuals and communities in the techniques of self-care and self-development as well as delegate their welfare responsibilities onto 'empowered people' and NGOs (Sharma, 2008, 42).

The Indian State's turn toward women's empowerment as a desired strategy and goal of development policies was the cumulative result of several intersecting local, national and transnational processes. The mushrooming of NGOs in the 1970's largely corresponded with the emergence of the second wave of the Women's Movement in India, with NGOs, which were often centered around women's issues, stepping up to deliver development where the state failed. This involvement of the NGO-sector in delivering development services was not without challenges, and has influenced debates in Indian feminism since (Roy, 2015).

In the 1980's many NGOs in India increasingly focused on women empowerment. The first State-led initiative focusing on women empowerment was the Women's Development Programme implemented by the Government of Rajasthan in 1984, a tripartite partnership between the government, NGOs and academic institutions (Sharma, 2008, 1). Many have followed, and the MCP falls into a long line of various nongovernmental, national, and transnational women empowerment initiatives in India that have been initiated over the last 30 years. Even though the concept of women empowerment might not be new, the meanings of the term have shifted considerably both throughout time and regional contexts. According to Kabeer, translating feminist insights to instrumentalist forms of advocacy and quantitative forms of measurement has had its costs, and empowerment has lost some of its intrinsic value in the process (Kabeer, 2001).

### **'Reaching the Unreached' in a world-class city**

The Mission Convergence Programme was launched in 2008, a time when Delhi was preparing to become a 'world-class city', a process that further marginalised the majority of the urban poor (Dhanju, 2011, 77). The city was preparing to host the 2010 Commonwealth Games, and urban development was booming. This development was far from inclusive, and an estimated 140 000 urban poor families were evicted and 'resettled' because of the Commonwealth Games (Williams, 2010). Settlements in Central Delhi that could not be demolished were hidden behind large billboards before the opening ceremony, and remained obscured from view until the end of the Games.

According to Dhanju, plans to modernise cities to attract global capital are intolerant of the urban poor and the marginal spaces they occupy. She explains how the MCP grew out of an intersection of neoliberal urban governance and development; through projects like the MCP, the Indian state is carving its own developmental path and maintain-

ing an image of a paternalist welfare state. Concomitantly, there have been notable shifts in economy and governance towards hybrid forms of neoliberalism. Through development projects and ‘good governance’ initiatives like the MCP, the state introduces new techniques for governing the urban poor in an attempt to mediate between the diverging interests of urban poor citizens and global forces. The collaboration between the state and NGOs within such projects creates technologies of new paternalism by enabling the state to better access, supervise and manage the urban poor citizens (Dhanju, 2011, 77-78).

The MCP was to converge the 42 different social security services of nine different departments in the Government of the National Capital Territory of Delhi, and make social security easier to access for vulnerable populations. It corresponds to a global neoliberal ideal of ‘good governance’ with an agenda that has two main goals: to promote empowerment and citizen participation, and enhance the transparency, efficiency and accountability of governments (Desai & Sanyal 2012, 17, Dhanju & O’Reilly 2014). Based on expansive surveys, the MCP expanded the definition of ‘vulnerability’, to include not only economic vulnerability, but also social and spatial vulnerability. This led to the numbers of eligible beneficiaries increasing substantially, from approximately one to four million people. The majority of the activities of the MCP were directed towards urban poor women – both as citizens entitled to ‘empowerment’ and as the key to lifting their families out of the position of vulnerability. The objectives of the MCP were two-fold: to reform, streamline and extend the Governments’ welfare service delivery to the vulnerable population, and to empower urban poor women through vocational training, self-help groups, health and legal counseling and other activities, within the low-income areas in the city, in the form of GRC-SKs (Dhanju, 2011, 8).

The GRC-SKs were the operational arms of the MCP, and were meant to be the human interface between the MCP and the urban poor as well

as run activities decided by the central administration. By establishing the GRC-SKs in collaboration with community-based organisations (CBOs) within low-income areas frequently inhabited by the city’s vulnerable population, the Delhi Government established an administrative unit within the slums for serving the poor, and for including them within the government records and bureaucratic channels (Dhanju, 2011, p. 80). With the GRC-SKs within their localities, the urban poor would no longer have to go around the city to different departments claiming their entitlements. Further, by including and depending on NGOs for the implementation of the government’s welfare services, the MCP included the NGO-sector within the Government, making the Mission Convergence Programme a government organised nongovernmental organisation (GONGO) (Dhanju & O’Reilly, 2014).

In 2010 and 2011, The MCP won the gold medal in the Commonwealth Association for Public Administration and Management (CAPAM) awards. It was also awarded a United Nations Public Service Award in 2011. Both acknowledgements highlighted the innovative way in which the MCP ‘represented a paradigm shift in governance with concrete steps toward holistic human development with poverty alleviation and women’s empowerment as core objectives’ (UN, 2011). It ‘fostered effective community participation in governance by creating a bottom-up implementation structure that currently engages more than 100 CBOs. These centers have now enabled government to reach the doorsteps of the vulnerable’ (CAPAM, 2012). This was all very well, but what was it like ‘on the ground’?

### **Empowerment at the grassroots**

The area serviced by the GRC-SK is located in East Delhi, and is comprised of three resettlement colonies that were created in the Indira Gandhi government’s slum clearances during the Emergency (Naraian, 2014, Banerji, 2005, 10). Two of the colonies were among the hardest hit in the riots following the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984,

where several hundred Sikhs were brutally killed (Kesavan, 2014). The atmosphere is still perceived as tense, and communal riots, this time between Hindus and Muslims, erupted in the autumn of 2014 (Ghose and Hafeez, 2014). Several of the informants, both inhabitants and NGO-employees, emphasised the challenges of daily life in the colonies. The area was deemed as ridden with crime, alcoholism, gambling and loitering, and was perceived as unsafe, especially after dark.

Several NGOs have set up centers and activities in the area, predominantly catering to women and children. The GRC-SK and other nongovernmental centers influenced the daily life in the colonies. Many inhabitants used several of the centers in their vicinity simultaneously. For instance, out-of-school children often attended several centers offering remedial education, filling their entire days with learning even though they were not formally enrolled in school. Non-formal educational centers were very popular, both because of the learning opportunities they provided, and as a way for women to ensure their children were properly cared for while they tended to their daily chores. Likewise, several of the women interviewed attended multiple activities at different centers. If a woman started to attend one activity, she would likely learn about and continue to take advantage of other activities in the area, and incorporate them into her own and her families' daily schedule.

The benefits of various development initiatives might not be distributed evenly throughout the area as a result of the snowball effect the initiatives seemed to have. The neighbors in one block frequently shared information with one another which enabled women that did not visit centers regularly to obtain knowledge about services offered should she need them. However, the information did not always travel across lines of identity. Class, caste, religion or even distance from the centers seemed to influence the implementation of projects, as the area is largely comprised of neighborhoods divided along religious, caste and class lines. Activities at

the GRC-SK were held during the daytime, as were the ad-hoc mass awareness meetings held in the communities. As the triple role of women was not sufficiently taking into account in the implementation of the MCP, working women were largely unable to attend meetings or activities.

### **'Soft' empowerment and gender attitudes**

As part of the empowerment strategy of the MCP, the GRC-SK offered two vocational courses: sewing and beauty-culture. These courses were very popular, to the point where the GRC-SK was called the *silai-kendr* (literally, the sewing-center) in the colonies. While the women picked up a new skill and a diploma, they also got to enjoy six months in an all-female space talking about daily life as well as their rights, women's issues and got advice on legal help. Most women enrolled in one course after the other, but one could see a subtle difference between two groups: married housewives predominantly attended the sewing course, whereas young women, not yet married, attended the beauty-culture course. Even though the vocational courses were intended to make urban poor women able to join the workforce, most of the women viewed them as activities they could attend in a safe space and spend time out of the house.

All of the women interviewed emphasised the change the center had brought to their daily lives, and would often highlight how spending time outside the four walls of their homes had allowed them to 'grow' as humans. "My life has absolutely changed. I can stand on my own two feet, I can work. My husband does not let me work outside, but because of the sewing course, I can work from home." (Interview, Urmila, 06.04.12)

In the quote above, Urmila makes two interesting points. First, she states that she now has the skillset to work, to 'stand on her own two feet'. In the next sentence, however, she states that her husband does not let her work 'outside'. In other words, her sense of agency had increased, but her

space to exert it, had not. Many of the women interviewed reflected on how they would use their new opportunities to exert agency within their social boundaries, especially by working from home. The sewing course would enable them to support their husband, predominantly the main breadwinner. This is an example of how empowerment components in development initiatives like the MCP do not break with societal gender norms.

There were also examples of men supporting female members of their family in their empowerment processes. Lalita, for instance, a 26-year-old mother of two attending the sewing course expressed:

It was my husband who sent me here. My husband was very cooperative, he says: Leave the children! I'll do half of the work at home, you do half - it's ok. Get out and do something, learn something, outside of the house, grow - both of us will manage together. He supports me a lot! (Interview, Lalita, 03.04.2012)

Sunita, an unmarried 22-year-old, had previously worked in a beauty parlour. She had now enrolled in the beauty-culture course at the GRC-SK to get her diploma. In addition, she was enrolled in a computer course and an English-speaking course at a private educational center in another part of Delhi. She shared with me her dream of opening her own beauty parlour in a 'better' area. She was ambitious, and told me how she would be very happy to go out and earn for her family, so that her father could retire. She was not in a rush to get married, and her family was not rushing her either: "My father says: do something, then marry. (...) He would be proud to see his daughter go out and do something on her own, earn on her own." (Interview, Sunita, 04.04.2012)

Many women would discuss the ways in which gender roles inhibited their movements. The majority of women interviewed, even Lalita in the quote above, would only come to the GRC-SK or go to

the market nearby on their own. We can say that the women empowerment component in the MCP is still largely in line with patriarchal structures in Indian society. It is not breaking the mold of societal customs, but is perhaps gently pushing on the borders. Thus, the Mission Convergence Programme promotes gentle reform, not explicit feminist revolution. According to Moser, this might be intended within the empowerment approach, as a too revolutionary approach to women empowerment might run the risk of appearing too extreme (Moser 1989, 1816). Because the GRC-SK was largely perceived as a safe space for women to spend time, a 'women's activity center', it was not perceived as threatening towards Indian family ideals.

### **The urban poor woman – the key to development?**

The explicit focus on women empowerment on part of the government and NGOs did not go unnoticed within the communities. During the interview with Lalita, a friend of hers joined us. They elaborated on the activities of the GRC-SK and said, jokingly: "Some men now even say that 'ooh, there is so much going on for women, they are so much ahead of us now, this is unfair of the government towards men!" They continued highlighting that the government must also be happy to see women benefitting from the schemes. They took this to be one of the reasons why it kept focusing on women:

Here, I come to know about new government schemes, especially schemes pertaining to women. I feel good about it, because most of the time it is men that take advantage of schemes - there are more schemes for men than for women, but here I feel that women are on equal footing with men, there are as many schemes and opportunities for women. Here, women are no less than men. Here, we are even more than men! (Interview, Lalita, 03.04.2012)

While offering courses for skill building, thus aim-

ing to increase the women's agency and their capability to contribute and participate in the growing economy, the GRC-SK offered women a female-only space where feminism and women's issues were frequently discussed. This seemed to build a sense of community amongst women frequenting the center. Further, by being the focal point in the implementation of MCP, the women inhabited important roles in the colonies, as well as in their families, because of the knowledge they obtained. This knowledge might contribute to informally renegotiating power relations by improving the women's 'backstage' influence in decision-making processes without disrupting the public social order (Kabeer, 2001, 35).

Three young girls aged 18, 19 and 22, who attended remedial education at the GRC-SK, reflected on how the change within their society was unequal. The opening of centers like the GRC-SK had changed the lives of women, but not the community as a whole:

It has changed mainly women's life, they want to go out and do something more, and people want you to do something on your own. Otherwise, it's the same. Actually, opening this center has changed a lot of things for women, but not for men. So the crimes are still happening, you go to other places and all these crimes are taking place. (Interview, Sameera, 04.04.2012)

Focusing on women's empowerment in India is timely. However, exemplified by the quote above, women empowerment initiatives can only go so far without also including men more explicitly. Even though the community centers were called gender resource centers, they were for all intent and purposes intended for women. Following Moser (1989) we see that the global tendency of development discourse to conflate 'gender' with 'women', thereby failing to see the myriad of gender relations people face in their everyday lives, has an effect on the implementation and realisation of empowerment initiatives. Even though the MCP aims to reach the vulnera-

ble population in general, by explicitly focusing on women and being based on specific ideas of who the urban poor woman is, what she needs, does and wants, it may inadvertently serve to alienate large groups of the urban poor. By not taking into account the myriad of ways one can be a woman, it is solidifying the very gender roles it is implicitly trying to modify, and thus possibly alienating women who do not conform to MCPs ideas of the 'Urban Poor Woman.'

After highlighting that they now felt more confident and had learned how to state their opinions and demand their rights, the three women shared their wish for 'a happy life':

I would like to express my happiness openly. What is happening right now is that the men have the right to express openly, but we don't. I mean, we sit like this [and talk], but we cannot express our happiness. (...) Freedom is what we want. In this area it is so bad that when women go out to support their families they are cut with blades, they are raped, you know, there are all sorts of things that happen. So, I just want the entire atmosphere to change, and girls should be allowed to move freely on their own (...) We also have the right to go out and become something. The government should help us in this. (Interview, Hemlata, 04.04.2012)

Even though the girls felt more empowered and were more aware of their rights as women, their circumstances still prevented them from making strategic life choices freely. In other words, their scope to assert their agency had not widened – but they were acutely aware of its potential. They voiced their desire to express themselves as they saw fit without having to take precautions because of the atmosphere in the colonies. As young girls, they struggled with mediating between their ambitions and choices in life, the realities and perceptions of the area, and prevailing gender roles and their families' expectations.



## Concluding remarks

Being empowered, according to Kabeer, is about being able to make strategic life choices within the contexts where this was previously denied. The World Bank's definition is to be able, both as individuals and groups, to make choices and to transform these choices into actions and outcomes. By these definitions, have the urban poor women targeted by the MCP become empowered? There is no easy answer to this question. As this essay has shown, the urban poor women targeted by the MCP managed their agency, and their empowerment, within the context of their daily lives, in ways that did not always correspond to the MCPs expectations. As 'ideal beneficiaries', their status as urban poor women and thus, their apparent need for empowerment initiatives influenced the myriad of ways in which the women organised their daily lives and engaged with NGOs and government bodies alike.

In their discussions on rights, empowerment, and the effects of the MCP, the majority of women interviewed highlighted that their lives had changed. They had become more knowledgeable about issues that concerned them, and because of the vocational courses, they were now able to 'stand on their own two feet' should the need arise. However, the MCP did not confront the hegemonic gender roles in Indian society, and thus, women found ways to exert their agency that did not challenge their place within their family and society overall. The GRC-SK, as an all-female space where women could spend time and chat, as well as come for legal and bureaucratic assistance, seemed very valuable for building a sense of community and self-worth amongst urban poor women. Thus, the GRC-SK contributed to the women's sense of empowerment and agency but did not challenge the circumstances in which they lived. As the Mission Convergence Programme conflated 'gender' with 'women' in its implementation, the overall effect on the community was lost. This is one of the pitfalls of making the 'Urban Poor Woman' both a means and an end in

development: Without trying to change the context in which she lives and including her as an active agent in development initiatives like the MCP, her ability to make life choices freely will remain constricted.

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