Women's Empowerment. In the NGO world, the term "women's empowerment" has become a buzzword used to describe almost any project that aims to improve the lives of women or girls. Like any buzzword, it's easy enough to add women's empowerment to the lexicon without understanding the true meaning behind it, or the notion of power at its center. The Strategic Impact Inquiry (SII) on women's empowerment explored the multiple definitions that, when combined, give rich meaning to the phrase.

For the three-year SII, thousands of women across dozens of research sites helped shape an authentic story of empowerment. The SII found that lasting empowerment for any given woman relies on a combination of changes in her aspirations and achievements (agency), in the societal rules and customs that shape her possibilities in life (structure) and in the nature of relationships through which she navigates her life (relations). This paper delves into the SII's learning on:

- *Why is women's empowerment critical for CARE's work and vision?*

- *Power: What are its various forms and how can it propel or undermine our work?*

- *What is the framework that we use to define and view women's empowerment?*

- *And how can CARE more effectively promote women's empowerment?*

-

Why Is Women's Empowerment Critical for CARE's Work and Vision?

María sits impatiently as the meeting drifts on and off topic. She does not have time for this. For the past 10 hours, she has been sorting through landfills gathering cardboard, packaging it and delivering it to her buyers. Before the day is done, she still must return home, prepare dinner, wash clothing and sleep so she can begin early tomorrow.

Since joining the Recyclers' Association in Cuenca, Ecuador, a CARE-supported coalition of women and men who sort and sell cardboard from landfills, María is both prouder and wearier.

When María arrived in Cuenca from her rural community, she had no luck finding work. She began working at the dump, picking out recyclables to sell and salvaging other items that she could put to use herself. In the beginning, she was looked down on for her work. Not anymore. She is proud that her participation in the Recycler's Association has brought dignity to the image of recyclers in Cuenca and enhanced her ability to earn fair wages to feed and educate her two sons. However, her days are longer now – stretching beyond 16 hours. After work and association responsibilities, she returns home to all the household responsibilities she has always had. Her relationship with her husband has become more distant, and at times he beats her.

Is María empowered? According to some evaluation metrics, she is. She gained greater financial security, decision-making power, negotiation skills and confidence. But, on the other hand, she alone is responsible for all cooking, cleaning and childcare. She hardly speaks with her husband and continues to face violence

Fulfilling Our Vision: CARE's vision is not simply to ameliorate poverty and social injustice, but to end it – something that cannot happen without gender equity and the empowerment of women. The valuable contributions that our projects make to women's lives – the health, security, economic or political gains that we help women achieve – may be wiped away without deeper changes in the rules and power relations that define how a society allocates resources among citizens. CARE must seize the opportunity to turn valuable short-term gains into long-term change by helping communities build more equitable structures and relationships.

from him, but she doesn't depend on him the way she used to.

María is very glad to have taken part in the Recycler's Association and glad for the increase in income it provided. However, while the association challenged the public's views of recyclers, it never challenged María to question the unfair structures and relationships in her own home. *Why is she alone responsible for all household work? Or how can María and her husband communicate more openly in order to collaborate effectively, build trust and end violence? How could the Recycler Association foster a greater sense of belonging and support among its members and what more could they achieve together?* By preparing María to engage with her husband differently and helping association members build stronger relationships, CARE could have strengthened the empowerment process taking place for more robust and sustainable impact.

Stories from Ecuador and 23 other countries over three years of impact research on CARE's work are clear: Lasting change is achieved through improvements in a woman's own capabilities, as well as the environment that surrounds and conditions her choices; and the power relations through which she must negotiate her path.

Power: What are Its Various Forms and How Can It Propel or Undermine Our Work?

Now, suppose CARE asks you to design a program in Cuenca. While researching, you come across María's story from the SII. **What can you gather about power in María's life?**

Studies of power highlight **five characteristics of power**:[1]

1. María, or anyone, *has multiple roles and relationships. With each, her level of power can vary.* María is a recycler, a wife, a mother, an association member and a Cuenca resident. At any given point, her choices can be defined by how others see her, or how she balances among these aspects of her identity. As a recycler, she now asserts her power by pursuing her rights; as a wife she does not and still tolerates violence.

2. *Power can be economic, political, social, cultural and symbolic. People are rarely powerful in (nor powerless across) all forms.* María is economically poor. As an association member, however, she gained political power.

3. *Power is not a zero-sum game.* As María gains power, it does not mean others lose that same amount.

4. *Power is socially constructed.* Power depends on where you are, who you are and what culture you are from. The significance of power changes from Cuenca to Timbuktu.

5. *A person's experience of power can depend on their gender, race, class, age, etc.* María is a woman in a society where men dominate. She is a migrant, with no education and among the poorest in her city. How might these factors influence her experiences with power?

Encompassing these five characteristics, there are also multiple types of power. Different studies have classified them in multiple ways. At CARE, we look at power in two broad categories:[2]

- Personal Power: which is comprised of Power Within, Power To; and
- Interpersonal Power: which includes Power With, Power Over (Visible, Hidden and Invisible)

These categories can be easily seen through María's life and our own.

---

[1] E Martinez (2003).

[2] V. Miller, L. VeneKlasen, M. Reilly and C. Clark (2006).

While María's story offers hints on what to look for when analyzing power, it is far from sufficient. In reality, a gender and power analysis requires more than reviewing a few stories. To understand dynamics of gender and power in rural Bangladesh, for example, the SII explored:

1. **Women's Roles and Empowerment:** Staff interviewed women across wealth categories to construct a matrix for each woman to map out social relations and mobility patterns. In addition, teams interviewed men and women to explore how residents from different socio-economic backgrounds saw empowerment.

2. **Local Governance:** CARE explored the administration of local justice systems, voting practices, and elected women officials' level of participation in local government and poverty alleviation. Staff mapped the local level infrastructure and key actors, with assistance from elected members and project participants. They asked a spectrum of residents about elites' behaviors and the relationships between elites and their electoral ward.
   Reflections: The SII found that staff's familiarity with elites and the forms of respect that elites expect were helpful in building rapport. During the study, staff confronted their own biases towards elites, as some findings contradicted their own views.

3. **Community-Level Social Dynamics:** Through focus groups, the team explored relationships between wealth, kinship, NGO membership and resources in each community. CARE then matched findings to analyze how class related to dispute arbitration and how wealth related to women's mobility/social networks.
   Reflections: Participants mentioned that these exercises enabled them to analyze social relations systematically in a way they had never previously done. From this work, staff learned in which households and from which wealth categories women sold labor power. Understanding the relationship between kin and class helped teams identify which women were less likely to earn money or participate in meetings.

4. **Gender and Socialization:** The team explored how parents treated and viewed sons versus daughters.
   Reflections: CARE staff learned how perceptions of gender and power are embedded in parent behaviors through this exercise.

5. **Decision Making and Control Over Resources:** Through literature review and interviews, CARE studied men and women's control over resources, decision making and strategies to influence decisions. The team used key personal events in women's lives as a basis for discussion on decision-making and women's interpretation and use of power.
   Reflections: Staff found this approach useful as they had previously found it hard to know how to work on gender issues. Respondents were positive about the interview experience and preferred the privacy. In preparation staff undertook research and discussed whether questions should be asked by people the women did not know. The team felt that discussing results was essential for increasing reliability and learning.

6. **Household Conflict:** To explore power, conflict and violence, CARE engaged women in role play to discuss situations that may provoke violence in the home and women's strategies to address violence.
   Reflections: Role plays depersonalize issues of violence, although women increasingly shared their own experiences as the workshop progressed, reflecting both trusting relationships with researchers as well as the prevalence of violence in their lives. The

Personal Power – Power Within, Power To: Some forms of power are entirely based on her own abilities and self-esteem. As a recycler, María has the ability to make money and provide for her children. She has gained confidence and a sense of self-worth.

Interpersonal Power 1 – Power With: By associating, women like María created new forms of power they could not have achieved alone – through the solidarity and support they gave to one another, and by using their collective voice to negotiate services, market access, and community and government recognition for their contributions as recyclers.

Interpersonal Power 2 – Power Over:

- ***Visible***: The public rules, resources, and relationships that serve certain people over others, and where the interests of certain groups are excluded.[3] Government and association rules, laws and membership guide what María must, can or cannot do.

- ***Hidden***: The ability and influence to set the rules, to determine who participates, to define the nature and timeframes of the decision-making processes. [4] Before the association formed, kinship and corruption ensured that the most valuable recyclable material went straight to one family, leaving María and other women to fight over the dregs. Women "like María" were labeled as a public nuisance by local media

---

[3] E Sprenger (2006).
[4] Ibid.

and municipal leaders, and excluded from policy forums that affected them.

- *Invisible*: The ability to shape meaning, sense of self and what is normal.[5] Harder to trace to individual actors, invisible power includes the beliefs and ideologies that shape María's very ideas and aspirations. They are so engrained in "daily life" that she may never even know they exist. They include classist attitudes about the rural poor, political beliefs about the virtue of success and self-help, sexist cultural and religious ideologies that define and reinforce what it means to be a good woman and mother: to take responsibility for all household affairs, oversee child-rearing and dedicate her earnings for her family.

What Does Power Mean for You?

Power does not only affect the women we work with, but also the men and women that compose CARE. Dynamics of power affect our behaviors and the decisions we make at work, at home and in our communities.

At work we are colleagues, direct reports and managers. At home we have another set of roles as parents, children, siblings and partners. In our communities, we are citizens, neighbors and friends. In each relationship and setting, our level of power can be different.

Looking at the illustration, consider how powerful you feel within each of the scenes in the illustration?

- With health services
- In your community
- In government
- In the market
- With your family
- In a religious community
- Among activists or in a movement

How do race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or religion play into your sense of power in each of these situations?

How Does Power Interact with CARE's Work?

Understanding the dynamics of power is critical for CARE to operate effectively as an organization.

Power plays an important role in CARE's work at multiple levels. In the communities with which we work, power will affect women's ability to pursue their empowerment. It will influence the outcome of our interventions. CARE's own power structures can empower or restrict staff and guide their actions, decision and priorities. At a broader level, power dynamics within the development industry – with donors, policymakers, and other NGOs – can also influence how CARE operates through policies, grants and partnerships.

---

[5] Ibid.

	Power Within, Power To	Power With	Power Over
In Communities	▪ Right to vote ▪ Ability to access resources ▪ Freedom of mobility	▪ The relationship among local power holders ▪ Coalitions or groups among community members	▪ Control over local government by a group ▪ Influence of local elites over the lives of the poor ▪ How elites accumulate resources ▪ Whose voices are heard and who sets priorities
Within CARE and our Local Partners	▪ Openness of communication with colleagues, managers and executive team ▪ Staff power to influence CARE's strategic directions and agenda from different levels	▪ Collaboration and knowledge sharing among colleagues to leverage our *power with* others to promote CARE's mission	▪ The policies, structures and procedures CARE follows ▪ Who is included/excluded in decision-making processes ▪ Who sets CARE's agenda ▪ Whose voices are heard
With Donors, Governments and other Development Institutions	▪ CARE's ability to influence the agenda of policy makers and donors	▪ Strategic partnerships that CARE engages to leverage power ▪ The relationships that different power-holders have with one another	▪ How donors and governments influence policies and funding opportunities that affect CARE ▪ The concerns and priorities of donors and governments that influence CARE's development and policy work and strategies through funding opportunities and policy

Power dynamics within each of these setting are interconnected and cut across one another. Rigid expectations from the donor about what gets measured and what gets rewarded as success may get "passed down" to frontline staff in ways that limit their responsiveness to local contexts. On the other hand, staff encountering power relations and realities that challenge their own worldviews or feelings of competence may consciously or unconsciously avoid these tough realities. For example, elite patronage networks in communities ensure that certain groups are supported while others are hidden (i.e. women's rights in marriage; dowry practices; the status of sex workers in society). If our staff come from and carry these practices themselves, how can the organization as a whole support them to challenge biases, shift the trajectory of our work and implement thoughtful, innovative programs?

CARE's Women's Empowerment Framework: How We Define and View Women's Empowerment

Understanding issues concerning power and gender within any context is a first step toward understanding women's empowerment. In order to help teams assess women's empowerment, CARE's SII developed a women's empowerment framework that captures aspects of power to, with and over. Though women's empowerment varies across specific contexts, the SII understands women's empowerment as the sum total of changes needed for a woman to realize her full human rights, which involves the interplay of changes in:
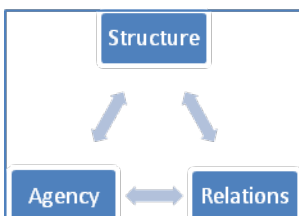
▪ **Agency**: a woman's own aspirations and capabilities

▪ **Structure**: the environment that surrounds and conditions her choices

▪ **Relations**: the power relations through which she must negotiate her path

Any individual indicator of progress can only be properly assessed

and valued in the context of how it advances that whole.

So, what do these broad categories mean in concrete terms? This description from Tanzania is typical of the range of contending dimensions of power that women point out:

> *"[An empowered woman] is a woman with a purpose in life. She is engaged in an income generating activity, such as running a tea café, selling fish or local brew or in some paid employment, in which she is knowledgeable and which brings her a good income. This is in addition to farming from which she has a good harvest. She has access to labor for her income generating activities.*
>
> *She is educated, hard working and has a healthy family with well spaced children. From her income she is able to take care of her family, bringing her children up in the way she deems fit and able to send them to school. Her children recognize and appreciate what she has done for them as a mother and in her old age they take care of her.*
>
> *She has a house made of cement/bricks with iron sheet roofing which provides better security than the mud and thatch roof housing. If the house has many rooms some can be rented out. She has access to her basic needs and owns productive assets such as land, trees, chickens, goats and cattle. Owning a lot of cattle would be great, as this is a symbol of wealth in her community.*
>
> *Her increased wealth status does not affect the relations between her and her husband 'because they love each other.' Her family may consume the produce from her assets or she can sell them for income. For instance trees can be sold as charcoal; milk from cattle can be sold for money. She has a say on how this income should be used. She demonstrates good conduct and respect for others. She is able to advise, influence and help others. She has good relations within her family and there is 'no worry within her family.'*
>
> *She is confident. She is successful. She is happy."*

In a similar approach, CARE culled 23 key sub-dimensions of women's empowerment from the literature, and validated their relevance in our research. These sub-dimensions offer a starting point for exploring agency, structure and relations in diverse contexts. While each may or may not be relevant to every context, the framework asks researchers and staff to at least consider each and their relevance to women's realities:

Sub-Dimensions of Empowerment

Agency	Structure	Relations
1. Self-image; self-esteem 2. Legal and rights awareness 3. Information and skills 4. Education 5. Employment and control of own labor 6. Mobility in public space 7. Decision influence in household 8. Group membership and activism 9. Material assets owned 10. Body health and bodily integrity	11. Marriage and kinship rules, norms, processes 12. Laws and practices of citizenship. 13. Information and access to services 14. Access to justice, enforceability of rights 15. Market accessibility 16. Political representation 17. State budgeting practices 18. Civil society representation	19. Consciousness of self and others as interdependent 20. Negotiation, accommodation 21. Alliance and coalition habits 22. Pursuit of accountability 23. New social forms: altered relationships and behaviors

The Tanzanian woman's definition of empowerment highlights key insights from the SII:

- **Intertwining Nature of Agency, Structures and Relations:** Research has shown that any progress in empowerment represents changes in all three dimensions of empowerment. A rise in a woman's income has implications across each dimension of empowerment – it requires that she has access to markets in order to earn income (structures), that she has the skills and confidence to undertake her own business (agency) and that her husband will support and respect these changes (relations). The woman's definition validates this understanding.

- **Importance of Relations:** Throughout the response, the woman emphasized the importance of maintaining supportive relationships. A husband who loves her, children who appreciate her, and a community that respects her are not just 'nice things' – they underpin the strength of her claims for social acceptance and support. Across studies, women defined empowerment as the ability to help and gain respect from others. These

desires were particularly discussed by socially marginalized women who described their own empowerment in terms of overcoming social stigma. In studies of empowerment and HIV, CARE found that women – whether workers in garment factories in Lesotho, in rural communities in Burundi, or commercial sex workers in Bangladesh, India and Peru – were making life and death decisions based on their need to feel loved and trusted by their romantic partner, and condoms represented mistrust and infidelity.

- **Invisibility of Structures:** Throughout her description, the woman did not explicitly discuss structural dimensions of empowerment. On the contrary, the woman affirmed gendered structures by defining her own empowerment by fulfilling traditional gender roles and responsibilities as a loving wife and caring mother. In Afar, Ethiopia, women discussed empowerment as being married, obeying one's husband and being circumcised. It is clear that women struggle to define empowerment in ways that challenge dominant ideologies – but just as clear are the stories and examples they celebrate where women are creating new spaces to grow and influence, while fulfilling traditional roles. As CARE works with women and empowerment, we must continue to support women to redefine their own views of empowerment and support those who are already challenging traditional roles.

New Understanding About Women's Empowerment: How can CARE more effectively promote women's empowerment?

- **Women's empowerment means social change.** Gender inequity, power and resistance are central to women's empowerment work. Development interventions are most helpful when they take a holistic, multi-level and broadly political view of women's empowerment. This includes not only working with women to build new skills, but to engage in women's relationships and the structures that shape women's lives through advocacy and alliances with grassroots women's movements from local to national levels. Change that advances women's lives takes place through many small steps; it is the linking and multiplying of these steps through appropriate networking and institutional strategies that facilitates more sustainable and just forms of broader based social change.

- **CARE must work with women as human beings, diverse and multi-dimensional.** Each woman has unique notions of empowerment and multiple roles. Choices she makes to protect and advance her interests in one domain may be undermined by those she makes in another – she may gain knowledge about HIV prevention, but choose not to use condoms with intimate partners. CARE must be curious about the logic behind these apparent contradictions, open to the possibility that her preferred pathways are very real and rational responses to the structures she confronts, and willing to engage as a partner to weigh and mitigate the tradeoffs inherent in change.

- **Programming for women's empowerment requires fewer formulas, and a deeper commitment to understanding how gendered power relations change in context, over time.** Because we understand women's empowerment to be about *societal* change, and not just individual change, we need to build programs with longer time frames, action in communities and beyond, strong partnerships and support for other social actors, and the agility that comes of knowing that we can't predict or control the pathways that social change will take. We need to challenge the idea that we can make meaningful impacts on social systems based on short-term, stop-and-start, output-driven project interventions alone – and instead invite steadfast collaboration through a programmatic approach. This is what it will take to embed promising seedlings of change in a society's guiding ideas and institutions.

Beyond Programming: what does this mean for CARE?

In order to stay true to our commitment to women's empowerment, the SII found that CARE must commit to women's empowerment and gender equity across the organization.

Working in Partnership with Women and Movements for Social Change

In seeking social change, CARE should leverage our _power with_ other organizations through strategic partnerships so that our programs are more robust, can have deeper impact and can influence the policies and procedures that guide development work. Through partnerships, CARE can engage donors and governments who have _power over_ international policy and agenda-setting in order to influence their opinions and priorities.

Strategic Commitment to Women's Empowerment

Ensuring organization-wide commitment to gender equity and women's empowerment starts with CARE's leadership. This commitment should continue to be reflected in CARE's strategic plans, communications, budgetary policies and staff incentives/recognition at all levels. Staff performance assessment and job descriptions that hold staff accountable to gender sensitivity, awareness and the promotion of women's empowerment will advance our work.

In recruiting, Human Resources can screen for candidates that demonstrate a commitment toward women's rights and empowerment. To equip new and current staff with the skills to work effectively in promoting women's empowerment, trainings are critical to build gender and power sensitivity and understanding. Furthermore, to capture invaluable learning about power dynamics in the communities where CARE works, CARE's new program approach allows staff to be retained across projects so that their learning and familiarity with communities where we work are preserved.

Further Resources

B Bode (November 2007). _Power Analysis in the Context of Rights-Based Programming_. Dhaka: CARE Bangladesh.

E Martinez, (2003). _Gender Equity Building Blocks_. Atlanta: CARE USA.

E Martinez, (2007). _Basic Concepts of Power_. Atlanta: Program Impact Knowledge and Learning Unit, CARE USA.

V Miller, L VeneKlasen, M Reilly and C Clark (2006). _Making Change Happen: Power – Concepts for Revisioning Power for Justice, Equality and Peace_. Washington DC: Just Associates.

B Robinson (2005). _SII Bangladesh Context Analysis Final Report_. Dhaka: CARE Bangladesh.

E Sprenger (2006), _Measuring Success: What's New? What's Next?_ Washington DC: Just Associates.

L Veneklasen and M Miller (2002). "Chapter 3: Power and Empowerment." _A New Weave of Power, People & Politics: the Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation_. Washington DC: Just Associates. Pp. 39-58.