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Topic 2: Empowerment of women as a transformative strategy for poverty eradication

"Empowerment of women in the context of Muslim Societies
as a transformative strategy for poverty eradication in a globalizing world"

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I.   *Introduction*:

One of the most pervasive challenges of development at the turn of the twenty-first Century continues to be Poverty. The eradication of poverty is a priority within the agenda of national governments, donors, multilateral and UN organizations in addition to a host of dynamic actors that have gained responsibility for development, and agency for specific issues within a globalizing world system. It is beyond need to substantiate that women are among the most hard ridden by poverty constituting 70% of the World's poor[1]. This qualification transforms women into the main target group for poverty eradication programmes, strategies and projects. While there is a global commitment to poverty eradication, women should constitute a focus group. At the same time the international community should strive to recognize the special needs of women as a focus group, and underline the inhibiting factors that act against granting them freedom from the burden of poverty due to gender inequalities and structural factors. Thus women are subject to a double form of inequality. The first is social inequality resulting from the uneven distribution of resources reflected in poverty. The second level of inequality is resultant from gender inequality. It enforces the effects and dynamics of social inequality, rendering women doubly vulnerable unto poverty than men.

Social values and norms usually set gender roles, within a specific cultural context. Thus gender roles and levels of inequality vary cross-culturally and from one country to the other. Gender inequality hence in developing countries shall not manifest the same structures and causes that permeate its manifestation in industrialized societies. Thus the level of development shapes the level of inequality where it is safe to make the assumption that the lower the level of development the higher the gender inequality. This is basically due to the limitedness of resources, the lower the level of education and awareness, the higher the competition for value services such as health and nutrition etc.. This is reinforced by the main value system controlling individual societies. Whether a society is patriarchal or non-patriarchal, the eminence of religion and deriving values and norms, and the specific predominating model of gender socialization, among other factors. Hence to tackle the question of empowering women as a transformative strategy for poverty eradication can start from a basic strategy of empowerment that is general in nature. But has to contain instrumental tools that shall allow for manipulation of variables targeting empowerment as per *context* where such a goal is to be targeted. The context hereby mentioned represents variables such as social make-up, religious connotations and effects on gender socialization models, norms, values, codes of behavior patterns, cognitive realities just to mention a few. The main focus of this paper shall hence be the 'Empowerment of women in the context of Muslim societies as transformative strategy for poverty eradication in a globalizing World'. Our analysis shall hence contain a level of empowerment of women in general as a transformative strategy, and Muslim women in particular.

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[1] Speech by Hillary Clinton at Opening Ceremony of the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 1995.

II.   *Human Poverty Shaping Terms of Empowerment*:

Poverty is a multidimensional, non-uniform phenomenon (UNDP, HDR, 1997: p.16). Thus in seeking a comprehensive definition of poverty and the nature and elements of poverty the 'human poverty' definition and index have constituted an inclusive (even though not exclusive) framework. In an attempt to seek a holistic definition of poverty that will reflect its multidimensional nature, the human poverty model is based on the 'deprivational approach' in contrast to the 'conglomerate approach' adopted in human development analyses (Ibid: p. 15).

Measurement of human poverty is carried out through the Human Poverty Index (HPI). HPI seeks to measure ¨ the deprivation in three essential elements of human life – longevity, knowledge and decent standard of living. Where the first relates to factors of survival; the second relates to education and literacy; and the third comprises 'overall economic provisioning' reflected in three variables, namely access to health, safe water and malnourishment of children under 5¨ (Ibid: p. 18). But it is necessary to state that in the present paper the recognition that ¨ human poverty is larger than any particular measure, including HPI. (Where) as a concept human poverty includes many aspects that cannot be measured – or are not being measured. Critical dimensions of human poverty excluded from HPI ..are lack of political freedom, inability to participate in decision-making, lack of personal security, inability to participate in the life of a community and the threats to sustainability and intergenerational equity ¨ (Ibid, p. 17). The HPI however and human poverty as a conceptual fr

Doxa refers to traditions and belief which exist beyond discourse or argumentation..¨ (Ibid: p, 25). This notion is particularly important in our analysis of women's empowerment in the context of Muslim societies, where realm of 'doxa' is more defined and implicitly disempowering. Thus the vicious circle in which many women in Muslim societies find themselves is intrinsic within their careful ¨ adherence to social norms and practices ¨ (Ibid: p, 24). This adherence is reflective of the 'doxa' realm that impregnates social and cognitive realities of women in relation to society. Where the subservient status becomes a prize status, and where women actually choose this subservience. Thus they effectuate the choice to become disempowered. I choose to call this '*negative empowerment*'.

Thus the most ideal form of 'choice' defining a level of empowerment is to be directly linked to its transformative qualities. When defining 'levels' of empowerment, I would like to converge with the different theoretical representations that distinguish between the existence of different levels and types of empowerment. Our main assumption is that empowerment takes place at the following levels:

1. *Level of Self*: Or the individual level where the exercise of empowerment emanates from the awareness and understanding of parameters of practice of ¨ power to ¨ and ¨power within¨[2].

2. *Level of group/community/society*: This level shall reflect the ability of the individual within a group e.g. 'women' to center activism about a reactionary cause. It involves a level of resistance that has to be reached after awareness. Hence the achievement of the first level is a pre-requisite for the second level. I have also chosen to combine the group level with the societal level, because it is assumed that when this (e)Tj252h

enhancing the level of 'power over', but at a global level. An expression of this level is the ability of groups and collectivities e.g. women to bring their interests and demands to international multilateral fora, and global agenda including the developmental agenda. At this level a flow is constantly effective between the local and global, whereby a level of harmonization and consensus is intended and necessary to achieve transformative force (e.g. international conventions, agreements, plans for action etc.).

In seeking a working definition of empowerment that seeks a linkage with the concept of human poverty and its eradication, a simple straightforward definition is sought, where:

The empowerment of women through the life cycle is reflected in their awareness of and ability to make strategic transformative life choices that target change and the elimination of basic deprivations in choices and opportunitj9.96 0 0 9.96 0 0 9.96 395 Tm(n)Tj9.96 0 0 9../76 0 0 9.96 123.7418 547.6802 Tm0-7s559.2 Tm(w)

realm represents a bottom-up approach. Hence it is important to concentrate on the two realms when contemplating a holistic approach to the dynamics for targeted change i.e. the empowerment of women as a strategy for poverty eradication. The formal realm and mechanisms of policy, structure and institutional processes enhancing empowerment shall be more explicitly dealt with within the section of the paper dedicated to 'recommendations'.

IV. ***Empowerment of women as a strategy for Poverty Eradication within Muslim Societies***:

One important factor when examining the explicated context is the role of culture on shaping and delineating paradigms for gender roles within Muslim Societies. One basic question that comes to the fore is whether it is specifically Islam as a religion, or its interaction with existent host culture(s) that renders the dynamics of interpretation, and practice delineating the reasoning behind male-female power dynamics, and space in Muslim societies. Thus in trying to understand the nature of interaction between religion and cultural influx one

Figure 4.1: Interaction between religion (at the level of Text, interpretation and Practice) with culture rendering a particularistic 'Doxa' acting on the definition and nature of gender roles:
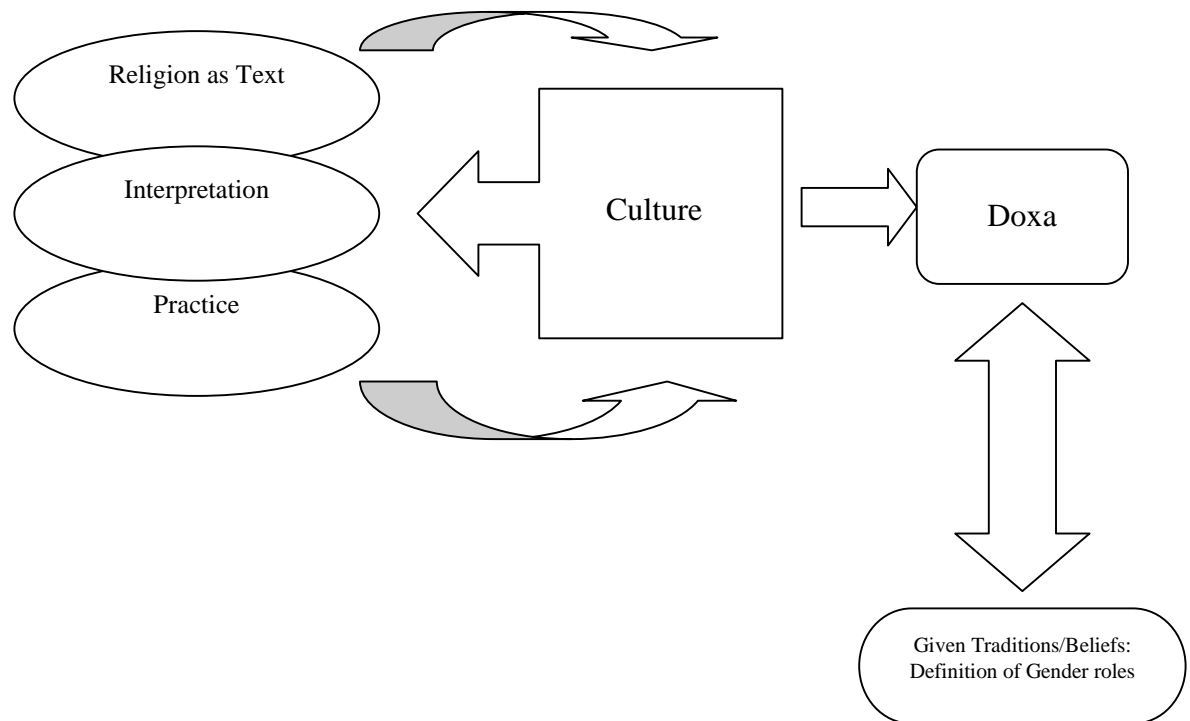
Sharabi (1988) has described the encounter between patriarchy and modernity, in his conceptualization of the development of 'neopatriarchy' a theory of distorted change in Arab society. Although Sharabi consciously delimited his theory to the analysis of Arab/Muslim societies, it is my intention here to generalize it to other Muslim societies where patriarchy and the traditions of constricting female space and power is a reality. Thus according to Sharabi ¨over the last one hundred years the patriarchal structures of (Arab) society, far from being displaced or truly modernized, have only been strengthened and maintained in deformed, 'modernized' forms…. Material modernization, the first (surface) manifestation of social change, only served to remodel and reorganize patriarchal structures and relations and to reinforce them by giving them 'modern' forms and appearances ¨(Sharabi, 1988: p. 4). These mechanisms are manifested in most Muslim and predominantly Muslim societies, especially in relation to gender roles and power dynamics between the sexes.

The mechanisms of 'neopatriarchy' also led to the development of what I denote as 'selective modernization' especially among specific ideological currents as represented by the conservative fundamentalist trends, and the growing Islamization of Muslim societies per se in the latest quarter of the twentieth century. This has led to the existence side by side of modern and traditional cognitive realities in Muslim societies, reflecting alternative, and conflicting paradoxes. Thus by selecting aspects of modernism that do not threaten the integrity of 'neopatriarchy'. And denouncing other aspects such as the

heightened liberalization of women, and expansion of their power and space in society

The importance given to social transformation in the development process, and the role of these non-class actors is pertinent to our analysis. This framework gives prominence to the interactive nature of relations between class and non-class actors, where the latter have come to play an active role in development,2 41224n.00im0 12 201.81 6m(and the rol)Tj12ic

different non-class actors). Any strategy and policy for change has to be therefore accountable to these factors and forces within a cultural-sensitive approach.

Another vital point of departure is the recognition that - as Oxaal and Baden state "adopting women's empowerment (or gender equality)[7] as a policy goal in development organization implies a commitment to encouraging a process of more equitable distribution of power on personal, economic, and political levels" (1997, p.24). Strategies that aim at dismantling some long-standing traditional manifestations in Muslim societies, and the institutional frameworks that reinforce them thus need to be focused on alleviating gender inequality and power imbalances within a holistic, offensive yet accommodative framework that will ensure transformative change. This is intrinsic within our understanding of the nature and pre-requisites for women's empowerment in Muslim societies, and especially in relation to mechanisms for poverty eradication. The subsequent section shall enumerate a series of recommendations that emanate from the present analytical progression.

V. *Recommendations Targeting Empowerment of Women as a transformative strategy for Poverty Eradication in Muslim Societies :*

Recommendations hereby presented combine basic general recommendations that may apply to the empowerment of women in general, while some are particularly designed to tackle the specificity of the context represented by Muslim societies. Recommendations comprise and address both the formal and informal realms, and parameters affecting women's empowerment.

1. Some interesting recommendations for action on the formal level were mentioned within the 'DAC guidelines for gender equality and women's empowerment in development cooperation' (1998: pp. 25-26). They are presented here with due modifications:

- Identifying macroeconomic and microeconomic strategies that tackle causes leading to the gendered incidence of poverty to the detriment and disadvantage of women when compared to men.
- Identifying and strengthening policy, institutional and structural frameworks that allow for equitable access to resources, choices and opportunities between the sexes.
- Enhancing the role of non-class actors in reinforcing the effects of targeted institutional, policy and structural changes that will enhance women's empowerment, and access to 'choices' and 'opportunities' that target poverty eradication. This level of action may be denoted as informal but is a required supplement to the formal agenda for action, as a legitimizing, accelerating force.
- Assessing and evaluating the financial performance of different economic models for growth, while attempting to identify those complemented by functional strategies to eradicate poverty that tackle the special status of women along the poverty line.
- Gender desegregated economic and developmental policy assessment and evaluation.

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[7] I choose to add gender equality here, as similarities are implicit and exist between it and women's empowerment on the level of aggregate effects on social development, and the society as a whole.

- Reviewing and enhancing policy and economic strategies and plans that will allow for the evaluation of women's unpaid

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