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VOICE AND AGENCY: WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Sarah Gammage, Naila Kabeer, and Yana van der Meulen Rodgers

ABSTRACT

This article examines how scholarship in feminist economics has developed and used evolving definitions of voice and agency, analyzing their expressions in the key domains of households, markets, and the public sphere. It builds on a rich body of work that explores the voice and agency of women and girls using bargaining theory, as well as behavioral and experimental economics, to understand inequalities in power and agency in relation to different institutional domains and socioeconomic processes. It also discusses each study in this volume, highlighting their contributions and drawing attention to critical gaps that remain in the literature.

KEYWORDS

Agency, empowerment, voice, justice, inequality, gender

JEL Codes: B54, J16, D63

INTRODUCTION

The social sciences have embraced a long-standing literature on the concept of agency, but it has taken somewhat different forms in different disciplines. Within the sociological and political economy literature, structure and agency are seen as closely intertwined manifestations of power. Structures shape the agency of individuals and groups, but the agency exercised by individuals and groups in turn shape structures, reproducing, modifying, or transforming them. Structures have been conceptualized in the work of Anthony Giddens (1984) as the distribution of rules and resources in a society: these structures have profound implications for the distribution of power and agency among individuals and groups. Nancy Folbre (1994) brings questions of identity more explicitly into her conceptualization, describing the collective structures of constraint in a society in terms of the pattern of rules, norms, assets, and preferences that position individuals within the social hierarchy according to their intersecting group identities and that determine the scope for agency available to them.

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Folbre's distinction between rules and norms is an important one because it accommodates the different ways in which continuity occurs within a system but also in which change can take place. On the one hand, rules have an official status and can be enforced by an external authority. Norms, on the other hand, have a more implicit and decentralized existence but also one that is more deeply embedded in our sense of who we are. The gap between rules and norms is one way in which change may be blocked. States may pass legislation in favor of gender equality, but its enforcement will be difficult in the absence of normative change. Of course norms may be far more fluid within society than official ideologies acknowledge, more accommodating of a diversity of practices but resisted by those in power who seek to impose greater uniformity in beliefs and practices.

Hence there is a strong tradition in the social sciences, one to which feminists from all disciplines have contributed, that locates agency in the context of structural constraints. This approach, however, has not sat comfortably within the methodological individualism that characterizes mainstream economics. Agency here is largely reduced to the idea of individual utility maximization subject to personal circumstances and budget constraints. This interpretation has changed over time as economists began to acknowledge that decision making was often carried out *between* individuals, not only *by* them, and that these individuals were differently positioned in their ability to prevail in the decision-making process. This view of decision making has given rise to game-theoretic approaches which seek to model how decisions might be made in situations of conflict between individuals with different resources to fall back on should the process break down.

These new approaches to the study of household decision making opened up a space for more explicit analysis of gender. They challenged the hitherto unitary model of the household, acknowledging the possibility of conflicting preferences between different household members, including men and women, and they highlighted the importance of resources available to individual members in determining their ability to bargain for their preferred outcomes (John Hoddinott, Harold Alderman, and Lawrence Haddad 1997; Marjorie McElroy 1990; Cecile Jackson 2013). However, while these new approaches represented an important step forward in highlighting bargaining and negotiation as additional manifestations of agency, they did not actually pay much attention to these processes.

This special issue of *Feminist Economics* brings together a number of articles on the voice and agency of women and girls. It builds upon a growing body of literature in feminist economics that analyzes voice and agency using bargaining theory as well as behavioral and experimental economics to understand inequalities in power and agency in relation to different institutional domains and socioeconomic processes. It also

draws on some of the work carried out by the World Bank in its project on *Voice and Agency: Empowering Women and Girls for Shared Prosperity*. This introduction explores how definitions of voice and agency have been used in feminist scholarship, and it analyzes their expressions in the key domains of households, markets, and the public sphere. Also discussed are the contributions to the literature of each article in this issue and where critical gaps remain.

CONCEPTUALIZING STRUCTURE, VOICE, AND AGENCY

It was Amartya Sen's work, particularly his work on well-being, capabilities, and co-operative conflict which feminist economists have found particularly fruitful, not only in relation to a more processual analysis of household bargaining, but also in relation to ideas about empowerment and social justice (Amartya Sen 1987, 1990, 1999). His work on co-operative conflict highlighted how inequalities of power did not necessarily take the form of overt bargaining but could take the form of silence and apparent consent to the existing arrangements if oppressive structures led to adaptation on the part of oppressed groups to the status quo ("adapted preferences"). He drew attention to the role of ideology in constructing how value was assigned to the contributions of different members ("perceived contributions") and to the systematic devaluation of the work of those who occupied an inferior position in the household hierarchy. And he pointed to the importance of the external environment, and the entitlements they embodied, in reinforcing or offsetting the distribution of power within the household: the denial or availability of work opportunities for women, for instance, the justice otherwise of legal provisions, the extent to which policies worked in favor or against gender equality, all of these influenced the nature of bargaining and negotiation that took place within the household.

Bina Agarwal's (1997) contribution on household bargaining also broke new ground in drawing explicit attention to the role of norms in both in their constraining and enabling form. She pointed to the power of social norms in governing the division of roles, responsibilities, and resources between household members along lines of age, gender, and marital status, but she questioned the extent to which the absence of protest on the part of household members signified their adaptation to their situation in the way that Sen suggested. It could well be a strategic decision on the part of subordinates since it might also reflect their awareness of the costs of protest. Agarwal also challenged the idea that norms were immutable and suggests that a great deal of change that took place in the context of intrahousehold power relations reflected contestations over norms. She extends Sen's emphasis on the external environment as a factor shaping

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bargaining power within the household to encompass the importance of women's participation in collective groups of various kinds.

This work is part of a growing tradition within feminist economics that points out that struggles over discourse and the power to interpret norms are often the means through which struggles over resources are manifested within the intimate domain of the family. For example, Irene van Staveren and Olanunbo Odebo (2007) highlight the importance of norms as a constraint to agency in the context of Yoruba households in Nigeria. They find that an improvement in women's fallback position will not necessarily support their well-being particularly in the context of restrictive patriarchal norms about child custody and patrilocal marriage. Moreover, Naila Kabeer's (2000) study of Bangladeshi garment workers in Bangladesh and Britain provides a detailed empirical analysis of the differences in the external environment which allowed women workers in Bangladesh to renegotiate norms about marriage and motherhood sufficiently to accommodate a break with prevailing norms of *purdah* while they failed to do so in Britain. And Greta Friedemann-Sánchez's (2006) study of women workers in Colombia's cut-flower industry notes the variety of explicit and implicit strategies through which they sought to contest power relations within the household, including the case of one woman who left her husband with their children for five months in order to bring home to him the value of the unacknowledged time and energy she put into unpaid domestic work after a full day of wage labor. Feminist economists have thus reinterpreted the bargaining literature to take account of some of the subtle, qualitative resources that subordinate groups can bring to bear when they have intimate knowledge of those who have authority over them.

Questions of voice and agency feature very centrally in the literature on empowerment as feminists have taken up the capabilities and functionings analysis to explore how women exercise strategic forms of agency in relation to their own lives as well as in relation to the larger structures of constraint that position them as subordinate to men (Martha Nussbaum 2003; Naila Kabeer 1999, 2001). Solava Ibrahim and Sabina Alkire (2007) tie their understanding of empowerment very closely to Sen's conceptualization of agency as an aspect of capabilities. While capabilities refers to the full range of "functionings" (or ways of being and doing) available to people, they cite Sen's definition of agency as what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important, the freedom to translate potential capabilities into achieved functionings. For Alkire and Ibrahim, empowerment is defined as an expansion of agency. They draw on Jo Rowlands (1997) to draw attention to the different ways in which such an expansion can take place: though changes within people themselves, changes in their relationships with others, changes in their ability to do things and changes in their

control over resources. They also draw attention to the broader institutional influences on the exercise of agency. However, they do not distinguish between different kinds of goals and achievements that people might seek to pursue through the expansion of agency, other than that they should be ones that people have reason to value. The assumption appears to be that what people have reason to value will be socially beneficial.

Naila Kabeer (2008a), on the other hand, does make such a distinction. Her conceptualization of empowerment is based on a three-dimensional model comprising resources, agency, and achievements, considered to be closely inter-related in that each builds on, and contributes to the other. She distinguishes between agency in the everyday trivial sense of the word and more consequential forms of agency that reflect strategic life choices as well as between forms of agency that reinforce the status quo and those that seek to question, to challenge, and perhaps to transform the status quo. Her understanding of empowerment encompasses changes in consciousness, or a sense of agency, including their sense of self-worth and social identity, their capacity to exercise strategic control over their own lives, and to renegotiate their relationships with others; and their ability to participate on more equal terms with men in reshaping the societies in which they live in ways that contribute to a more democratic distribution of power and possibilities (Naila Kabeer 2008b: 27). Consciousness, voice, and action are thus all facets of agency and encompass both the individual and collective exercise of agency.

The question of voice as part of the politics of representation takes on a particular significance in the feminist literature on collective action by women coming together in various organizational forms, ranging from co-operatives, political parties, social movements, women's organizations, trade unions, user groups, and so on (Bina Agarwal 2000; Petra Dannecker 2000; John Blaxall 2007). These articles go beyond individual agency to explore how its collective forms enable women to challenge, transform, and overcome gendered structures of constraint. As this literature points out, coming together around common goals and interests helps to amplify their voice and increase the likelihood of influence in ways that would not be possible for individual women acting in isolation. Such collective action is also critical because of the costs that are often paid by women acting individually to defy patriarchal structures.

The question of norms and agency are central themes in the contribution by Rebecca Pearse and Raewynn Connell (2015). As they point out, norms can change as part of larger processes of socioeconomic change associated with the structural transformation of economies, democratization, labor migration, and technological advances. But their main focus is on the role of the individual and collective agency in the renegotiation of norms. Gender norms are not just constructs perceived by individuals, but are very real structures and constraints that are embedded in organizational bodies

and practices, economic transactions, and group identities. The fact that gender norms are embedded in institutions is a widely held position in feminist economics literature and feminist economists have increasingly incorporated this analysis into institutionalist economics as a means of engendering this framework (Lourdes Benería, Günseli Berik, and Maria Floro 2015). Diane Elson (1999) crystallized this approach in her article that addresses how gender is embedded in labor markets.

As argued by Pearse and Connell, in their daily lives, individuals navigate a complex social terrain that is permeated by a multitude of gender norms. However, as research and practical experience shows, despite a surface appearance of social consensus, it is rare for all members of a society to share the same beliefs. Hegemonic norms about masculinity and femininity may disguise a proliferation of practices. Departures from norms may go unnoticed, co-existing invisibly alongside more conformist behavior. A key point here is that while norms prescribe practices, they do not directly translate into them: there is scope for bringing about change within norms as the exercise of agency in the translation process subtly alters their meanings, an endogenous and often hidden process of change.

At the same time, they also underscore the point that gender relations can be reshaped by deliberate collective action aimed at bringing about normative change in domains ranging from school classrooms to public politics. They note, for instance, that a key element in many of the policy documents emanating from gender advocacy in the public sphere is a move away from customs and traditions inherited from the past. Rather, these documents spell out norms about the way things ought to be in the future: norms can have “an element of transcendence” (8). They cite the example of how an unemployed workers’ movement that initially reproduced traditional gendered roles among its membership came to declare itself as anti-patriarchal in its basic goals in response to the steady critiques of some of its women members. While Pearse and Connell argue that pressure for change is mainly likely to come from women, since prevailing gender order largely privileges men and gives them a stake in its continuity, they note the emergence of pro-equality movements among men in contexts as diverse as South Africa, India, and Brazil.

To sum up this discussion, in keeping with the ideas about agency that feature in this volume, our focus is on agency as the capacity for purposive action, the ability to make decisions and pursue goals free from violence, retribution, and fear but it also includes a cognitive dimension, what Kabeer describes as a “*sense* of agency” (1999: 438). We consider “voice” to be an aspect of agency, the ability to articulate practical needs and strategic interests, individually and collectively, in the private domain and in the public. But for change to happen, “voice” must go beyond the capacity to speak, it must be heard, listened to, and acted on. This consideration is one of the problems addressed in some detail in the analysis by Anne

Marie Goetz and Rob Jenkins (2015) about women's agency in the political domain.

The contributions to this volume explore voice and agency in households, markets, and the state in both individual and collective forms, analyzing some of the spillovers from one realm or expression of agency to another. Much of the feminist literature reviewed here focuses on how individual agency in markets spills over to agency in the household and vice versa. We also see collective agency in and through markets, when workers and producers form unions and cooperatives, and can examine the implications for individual agency in these same markets. The same is also true for collective agency in the state and its ability to foster individual agency in the state, the example of the suffragette movement is relevant here.

Expressions of voice and agency can be found in all these realms and they are frequently overlapping and mutually supportive. The analyses presented in this volume explore both the process of expressing agency in terms of bargaining, and the outcome of the exercise of agency in terms of improved welfare and well-being. Moreover, these analyses of voice and agency examine process and outcome not just in terms of the formal modeling and empirical exploration, but also in their narrative exposition of the type of voice and agency exercised.

HOUSEHOLDS

One domain where we view and measure women's relative autonomy and individual agency is in their access to and control over income and assets. Greater control of income by women and women's asset ownership can result in changes in norms and attitudes that influence economic decisions and social behaviors within and outside of the home. Income generation and access to credit can have feedback effects on measures of autonomy such as an increased role in household decision making, greater mobility, employment, and improved bargaining power vis-à-vis male members of the household.¹ Central to the social context in which people operate is bargaining power, and control over assets can have empowering effects for women in intrahousehold power dynamics. Women's employment in income-generating activities can strengthen their negotiating power in the household by improving their fallback position, which facilitates decision making to improve well-being. For example, households may move away from adherence to harmful traditional practices, such as early marriage or female genital mutilation, when women household members enter markets and improve their bargaining position in the household through the exercise and control over income and assets. Greater autonomy and a shift in intrahousehold power dynamics that favor women can have many potentially beneficial effects, including a reduction in the incidence

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of domestic violence, lower fertility, and improved health outcomes. In addition, women's control over assets is often positively associated with women's autonomy and authority within the home (Bina Agarwal 1994). Yet, this relationship is not always automatic and is mediated by the presence of restrictive social norms and patriarchal practices, internalized by both men and women (Seema Vyas, Jessie Mbwambo, and Lori Heise 2015; Haimanti Bhattacharya 2015)

In this volume, Quentin Wodon, Minh Cong Nguyen, and Clarence Tsimpo (2015) develop an analysis of voice and agency in the household that explores the determinants and consequences of child marriage in Uganda. The contribution draws on both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to explore girls' "functionings," what they are doing and being, and it demonstrates that educational outcomes are truncated through child marriage. Explicit in this study is the notion that capabilities can be transformed into individual agency – and that the absence of investment in capabilities, as expressed in child marriage and manifest in school dropout, constricts women's and girls' agency and reduces individual choices. The contribution also sheds light on another more subtle dynamic whereby underinvestment in the capabilities of girl children leads to underperformance in school and can bring about earlier child marriage. This conclusion is consistent with findings from the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW; 2006), that in eighteen of twenty countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage, girls with no education were up to six times more likely to marry as children than girls who had received a secondary education. This differential can be even more acute in poor and rural settings. In a context where cultural norms and stereotypes reinforce expectations that women depend on men for income and earnings, if continued investment in schooling is not an option, marriage appears to be the next preferred choice to "secure" the well-being of young girls. The consequences of child marriage are devastating both for an individual's agency and well-being as well as for collective well-being: education and labor force participation drop substantially; violence within the household can be exacerbated; and a range of individual, child, and maternal health outcomes worsen.²

Wodon, Nguyen, and Tsimpo's (2015) analysis explores the impact of child marriage on secondary school enrollment in Uganda using several approaches to triangulate different datasets. The impact of child marriage on school enrollment is not easy to measure because of potential endogeneity issues, where the decisions to marry and drop out of school are observed simultaneously. Moreover if the factors that lead to child marriage are also similar to those that lead to lower education enrollment, then the decision to marry girls early may not be the primary factor leading to school dropout. The results overwhelmingly indicate that child marriage has large and negative impacts on girls' school enrollment. The issue of

reverse causality, however, is not explored empirically in this article and the question remains as to whether and how underinvestment in girls' education can lead to early marriage in similar contexts throughout the world.

The analysis by Wodon, Nguyen, and Tsimpo (2005) generates compelling support for policy interventions that could reduce rates of child marriage. One option is cash transfers that are conditional on delaying marriage until after eighteen years of age. Such incentives could consist of an immediate cash transfer upon birth and a long-term savings bond redeemable on the girl's eighteenth birthday if she is unmarried, with additional bonuses for continuing education. Other policy interventions are co-incident with broader discussions on state responsibilities that surround the contentious issues of conditional cash transfers (Maxine Molyneux 2009). In particular, making quality secondary education available and providing safe transportation to secondary schools can become a key strategy in reducing child marriage. Engaging the patriarchy and male leaders to critically examine the causes and consequences of child marriage is also a prescriptive option. As Wodon, Nguyen, and Tsimpo (2015) observe, reframing the transition of girls to marriage requires a dialogue with religious and community leaders. Such a dialogue will be essential should policy seek to act on changes in social norms that reduce the likelihood young girls marry before they are eighteen years of age.

Also in this volume, Smita Ramnarain (2015) examines individual and household expressions of voice and agency in post conflict situations. Using ethnographic data from in-depth interviews and participant observation collected through field work in Nepal in 2009 and 2011, Ramnarain provides insight into the forms of agency that the war-time breakdown of social structures brings about for civilian female heads of household, as well as the cultural institutions and patriarchal norms they must mediate in their everyday struggles for survival. She notes that much of the relevant literature is focused on the political, legal, and humanitarian aspects of conflict on women's lives. There is far less attention to the material implications of conflict for women's lives in contexts characterized by acute material uncertainty and physical insecurity. Ramnarain examines agency and voice in the coping strategies articulated by a particular subset of women in Nepal, namely female-headed households, in the immediate aftermath of civil war. The study provides insight into the multiple forms of agency and sites of resistance that the war-time breakdown of social structures and codes precipitates for civilian female heads of households.

The contribution also reflects upon the cultural institutions and patriarchal norms these women must mediate in their everyday struggles for survival. The findings reveal, not surprisingly, that female heads differ greatly in terms of their ability to exercise agency, depending in particular on their place in the socioeconomic hierarchy. For women from poor and

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socially marginalized groups, lack of education and resources posed a major constraint on the livelihood options available to them but most of them intensified their work efforts. While social and gender norms constrained the capacity for agency for most women, the contribution shows how their operation through surveillance by kin and community limited to a much greater extent the agency of women from higher caste households in relation to their ability to seek paid work, influence intrahousehold decision making, and ability to consider remarriage.

Ramnarain's conclusions are in keeping with another recent analysis on gender and conflict in Nepal which found that women's likelihood of employment increased as a consequence of the conflict (Nidhiya Menon and Yana Rodgers 2015). The economic repercussions of the war weakened the country's social fabric as households and communities struggled to survive. Rather than depend more on subsistence work and remittances from husbands who had migrated, women were induced to engage in more employment (the added worker effect) as a consequence of conflict. Hence women's additional employment served as an important source of resilience during this time of crisis. What Ramnarain adds in this volume is a more nuanced analysis of how social norms pose constraints to agency for women from different class and social groups.

MARKETS

Markets are the second important domain that occupies a central place in the feminist economics literature and are touched on in a number of contributions to this volume. An under-researched aspect of women's agency in the economic literature relates to the cognitive dimension. This cognitive dimension is addressed by Elise Klein (2015) in relation to women's participation in informal markets in an urban neighborhood in the outskirts of Bamako, the capital city of Mali. Using a case-study approach based on inductive mixed methods, the author identifies two psychological concepts that matter for women's purposeful agency as individuals and as members of their community: "*dusu*" (internal motivation) and "*ka da Iyèrè la*" (self-belief). She finds that women's agency in this part of Mali is defined by not only their access to resources but also by these internal dimensions of agency which are, in turn, reinforced by gendered institutions and social norms expressed by the community.

The psychological dimension of agency is illustrated by the example of a woman living in poverty who had a small business selling shoes. One day her entire inventory was stolen. The woman said she may have lost all her shoes, but at least she had the *dusu* and the *ka da yèrè la* to branch out into a different type of self-employment, namely washing clothes for other people, so that she could rebuild her capital and resume her shoe business. In other words, it was not merely survival imperatives that explain this

woman's actions but also her "sense of agency." While she may have been reproducing gendered norms by engaging in what was considered women's work (washing clothes), the meanings and motivations she brought to her actions meant that she was able to overcome a major setback that might have otherwise undermined her own well-being and that of her household. Klein concludes that concepts such as *dusu* and *ka da I yèrè la* give women the strength and aspirations to work towards valued goals but within a cognitive framework that continues to be structured by the strongly gendered social norms and institutions.

In general, however, agency in markets has received relatively less attention in the feminist economics literature, with the focus largely on women's disadvantage and their (in)ability to access productive resources in land, housing, agricultural, credit and asset markets: a brief review of this literature is to be found in Naila Kabeer (2015a). When agency in markets is considered, it is largely through spillovers from earnings and access to credit to other domains such as the household. Less attention is paid to the role that having access to these productive resources plays in exercising agency in the market itself, particularly in labor and product markets, or indeed over the market, shaping the market's form and the regulatory framework that governs it. For instance, how can having agency in the market affect the terms and conditions of exchange for buyers and sellers, lead to better prices for inputs and outputs, or indeed influence the regulations and rules that govern exchange through the imposition of minimum wages and price floors or ceilings, or competition policies that remove barriers to entry or reduce the rents from imperfect competition? This gap in the literature highlights a critical leap of faith that often occurs in development programming whereby it is assumed that facilitating women's access to productive resources may be both necessary and sufficient to improve their bargaining position in product and factor markets (Oxfam 2013). For example, formal ownership of land and housing alone is not the same as having agency in farm management and production decisions about such issues as farming methods, crops and marketing. Neither is asset ownership equivalent to having agency in the use of resulting incomes, let alone voice and influence in the community (Cheryl Doss, Chiara Kovarik, Amber Peterman, Agnes Quisumbing, and Mara van den Bold 2013).

Another leap of faith in the development literature is the presumption that organizing women in cooperatives, unions, and other collective entities automatically leads to their empowerment without a critical analysis of the way in which women's participation in collective agency can be brought to bear on markets by influencing the terms and conditions of exchange (Ruth Pearson 2005). Not well understood is the role of collective agency within product and factor markets to challenge imperfect competition and the unequal power structures that affect women's consumption,

production, and broader participation. Studies of asymmetries in power in labor and product markets have tended to focus disproportionately on the deleterious effects of these asymmetries on outcomes for men and women workers and less on the manifestations of agency that can change or obviate these market structures and power dynamics (Chris Bonner and Françoise Carré 2013). Beyond Felix Meier zu Selhausen's (2015) analysis in this volume, there has been little attempt to deconstruct the bargaining processes implicit in these collective endeavors and explore in detail the determinants of women's organizing or indeed how women's organizing can erode power asymmetries and influence the operation and governance of markets. Thus far, analyses of how women have organized and expressed collective agency to challenge asymmetric power in markets have tended to center on agricultural markets (Helen Markelova, Ruth Meinzen-Dick, Jon Hellin, and Stephan Dohrn 2009; Lauren Pandolfelli, Ruth Meinzen-Dick, and Stephan Dohrn 2007). These studies mostly focus on the group effects of cooperative organizing on access to markets, storage, transportation, and credit with concomitant effects on income and consumption.

A recent publication by Oxfam (2013) attempts to bridge this gap by examining collective agency for small-scale women farmers in agricultural markets in Africa. This publication carefully explores the perceived benefits of organization for smallholder farmers including: economies of scale, reduced marketing costs, pooling of risks, increased access to services, access to higher-value markets, opportunities for value addition, and greater bargaining power and influence (Chris Penrose-Buckley 2007). It also examines the potential for pooling labor, resources, and assets to enable women to overcome some of the gender-specific barriers they face such as time poverty (A. J. E. Charman 2008). While the Oxfam researchers can identify positive group effects from participation, one of the key findings is that improving income and the terms and conditions of employment and production does not necessarily spill over to agency in other domains such as the household.

This finding is consonant with that of Felix Meier zu Selhausen (2015), who conducts an empirical analysis of the determinants of cooperative participation in his article on marketing cooperatives in Western Uganda in 2012. His findings highlight the importance of access to and control over land as a key motivator for women to seek to join the cooperative. He also explores those factors that might affect the intensity of their engagement in the cooperative, using shareholding as a proxy for their commitment to the cooperative. The analysis emphasizes that the length of membership, the receipt of previous extension services, more equal intrahousehold power relations, spousal income pooling, and joint land holdings positively influence women's commitment to collective action. These findings imply cooperatives that fail to address gender inequalities in power relations within the household and by default within the cooperative will not set

the right conditions for women's meaningful and effective participation. This conclusion echoes Kabeer's (2015a) analysis that underscores how socially sanctioned roles place limits on women's capacity for economic agency.

In some of these analyses of agency in markets we learn that women may be disproportionately vulnerable to imperfect competition in labor and product markets because of their caring responsibilities in the home (Elizabeth G. Katz 1995). This susceptibility holds true in both developed and developing countries and affects their mobility and the timing and sequencing of their productive and reproductive activities. Time burdens and domestic responsibilities may limit how far women can travel to work and the type of work they can undertake (Valerie Preston and Sara McLafferty 1993; Brian D. Taylor and Michael Mauch 1994; Niki T. Dickerson 2002; Alan Manning 2003). Consequently, efforts to address women's agency in markets must also resolve the Gordian knot of care deficits, recognizing, reducing, and redistributing care deficits accordingly (Francesca Bettio and Janneke Plantenga 2004; Janet Gornick and Marcia Meyers 2009; Fiona Williams 2010; Special Rapporteur 2013).

Imperfect competition in labor markets may prove to be particularly difficult for women to overcome without collective agency. Unions provide one potential site for claims-making and the expression of collective agency to improve the terms and conditions of employment (Naila Kabeer 2015b). Declines in union density and in collective bargaining are eroding union power across the world. Moreover, union membership is lower for women, and they are less frequently covered by collective bargaining mechanisms (Sarah Gammage 2015). These trends notwithstanding, women's membership of trade unions is dramatically larger in the public sector – but even in developed countries and in the public sector there is seldom gender equality in union membership. Yet important expressions of women's collective agency can be found in union organizing across the world. From the mid-1990s onwards, countries in Latin America began to form tripartite gender commissions to address women's issues. In Chile, the Tripartite Commission for Equality of Opportunities for Women at Work was installed in 1995 and, in Brazil, a Working Group for the Elimination of Discrimination in Employment and Occupation was established in 1996. Similar tripartite commissions were put in place in Uruguay (1997), in Argentina and Paraguay (1998), and in Bolivia, Costa Rica, and the Dominican Republic (2010). These commissions also include representatives from the ministries of labor, the women's ministries, and representatives of trade unions and employer's associations (Linda Briskin and Angelika Muller 2011). The tripartite commission in Uruguay has contributed greatly to legislative initiatives including drafting the 2006 Law on Domestic Workers and the 2009 Law on Sexual Harassment (Alma Espino and Gabriela Pedetti 2010).

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In the arena of work and claims-making, the evolution of the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 189 on Domestic Workers reflects one of the most commanding expressions of recent agency in labor markets, manifest by a group of workers who are among the most vulnerable and most invisible. This change did not happen overnight. It was foreshadowed by a long history of organizing and coalition building. Domestic worker organizations have been forming and claiming their rights around the world from the early 1970s onwards. Two key unions, the Sindicato Unico de Trabajadoras Domesticas from Uruguay and Federação Nacional das Trabalhadoras Domésticas (FENETRAD) from Brazil were among the domestic workers groups that participated in the founding congress of the Confederación Latinoamericana de Trabajadoras del Hogar (CONLATRAHO) in 1988 in Bogotá, Colombia. CONLATRAHO currently groups together more than thirty-seven organizations from over eleven countries in Latin America. They work with and through other unions in the region and are members of the International Domestic Workers Federation. In Asia, similar groups were organizing and forming alliances and coalitions. The Committee for Asian Women brought together domestic worker organizations from five Asian countries to set up the Asian Domestic Workers Network (ADWN) in 2004.

A focal point for this collective action was through the first global conference of domestic worker organizations in Amsterdam in 2006. This conference was organized by a number of NGOs, including Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), RESPECT-Europe, and several prominent domestic worker organizations and federations in Ireland and Italy, vigorously supported by the ILO, the International Union of Foodworkers (IUF), and the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). Two key demands were articulated at the conference: the formation of an international network of domestic worker organizations, and the pressing need for an ILO convention on the rights of domestic workers. While the former was inevitable by this time, the latter was unusual in that it sought a sectoral convention for the ILO where most conventions are applicable across all sectors.

Organizing and lobbying continued after the ground-breaking conference in Amsterdam. Finally, in 2008, the International Domestic Workers' Network (IDWN) was formed. WIEGO played an important role in helping it to find funding and to link to domestic workers' organizations around the world. Simultaneously, the IUF and ITUC took up the call for a new convention with the ILO. The IDWN wanted a place at the table with official representatives participating in the ILO's International Labour Congress (ILC) with negotiating rights. In 2010, eleven domestic workers leaders were members of the workers' delegations of their countries, by 2011 this number had risen to 20 (Kabeer [2015b](#)).

While the call for a new convention met with initial resistance at the ILC, momentum took hold and supportive governments lobbied together with unions and domestic worker representatives. Serendipitously, there was also little resistance from the employers' organizations and several proved to be supportive of domestic worker organizing. On June 16, 2011, Convention 189 was proposed and accepted with a resounding majority: 396 delegates, sixteen against, sixty-three abstentions. As of 2015, there were seventeen ratifications to C189 including Germany, Ireland, Italy, and South Africa.

Other examples of collective agency in markets can be found in the formation of cooperatives. Cooperative arrangements in business and organizations have a long history and continue to grow in importance, meeting a variety of business, employment, social, and ecological objectives of members and their communities. In both industrialized and developing economies, cooperative organizations have gained increasing influence in segments of the labor market encompassed by marginalized workers, especially informal sector workers, migrants, farmers, and the poor. For example, low-income fisherwomen in India have formed fisheries cooperatives that have empowered them economically through greater access to credit, eco-friendly technologies, and participation in decision making (Prameela Shetty and T. N. Sreedhara 2011). And in Nicaragua, an association of small-scale coffee farmer cooperatives helped to reduce farmer vulnerability to oversupply, low prices, and corporate dominance (Christopher Bacon 2005).

WIEGO provides another important example of how supporting networks and organizations to leverage collective agency can improve outcomes in product and factor markets, even for informal workers. The Global Alliance of Waste Pickers (GAWP) brings waste picker organizations – cooperatives, unions, associations, and networks – from countries in Latin America, Asia, and Africa into an informal networking process. WIEGO has supported this process from 2007 onwards by mobilizing financial resources and by initiating, facilitating, and coordinating activities. The primary focus of their support is on process and networking rather than institution building. It is a global alliance that was first forged with environmental justice NGOs rather than with the labor movement proper. The GAWP has creatively used the United Nations Climate Change Conferences (2009, 2010, 2011) and the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (2012) as opportunities to raise consciousness about the role of waste pickers as important players in mitigating climate change and contributing to a sustainable environment. It has also used the World Urban Forums to promote waste pickers' right to be included in urban policy development.

One of the profound achievements of this collective of actors has been to support claims-making by waste picker organizations and increase

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their influence over waste policy management, recycling programs and pricing. The Packaging Act in Uruguay in 2007 (*Ley de Envases*) was greatly influenced by the organizing strategies of waste pickers supported by a range of NGOs including WIEGO and GAWP. Lobbying with municipal governments ensured that the law was used to impose a tax on packaging of any materials that required recycling which is being used to formalize waste picker groups, provide them with social protection, guarantee minimum wages, and ensure they have access to recycling plants. Such an example of voice and agency in markets, for vulnerable groups in highly informal settings, underscores the importance of supporting organizing and organizing strategies to shape and regulate markets.

THE ROLE OF THE STATE

The role of the state in fostering and sanctioning women's agency is considered in this volume primarily through the lens of political participation and representation. Ulrike Mueller (2015) explores women's political voice and agency in India's local governments using a game theory approach that builds on George Akerlof and Rachel Kranton's (2000) analysis of identity in economics. The contribution embraces a comprehension of a politics of participation that implies that it does not only matter what is represented, but also who is a representative. Through her analysis, Mueller examines how quotas for women in local councils have been used as a lever to simultaneously secure gender equality in political participation and to foster rural development. It was expected that affirmative action measures would particularly enhance women's agency because of attributions about women's preferences and decision making to support decentralized service delivery. As proponents of affirmative action have argued, those in favor of affirmative action contend that when women serve as government officials, they are more likely to advocate for the needs of their constituents, and especially their female constituents. Supporters of affirmative action also argue that female representatives use different decision-making strategies in public finance and contracting, which contributes to outcomes such as less corruption and graft. Therefore, gender-based quotas in public-sector leadership positions can contribute to different political processes that yield more favorable and democratic outcomes. Yet as Mueller observes, results from countries that have implemented affirmative action policies in their local government systems have proven to be inconclusive.

Mueller appeals to identity economics and applies intersectional and institutional theories to shed light on the agency of elected women representatives in different federal states of India. Mueller re-examines and reinterprets a number of empirical analyses of election results and

qualitative analyses of political participation in India over the last decade. The contribution spells out the ways in which institutional structures embody long-standing norms circumscribing the possibilities for agency associated with the different, and intersecting, identities of gender, class, caste, and religion. These impose strict limits on the terms on which women from different groups can participate in politics, frequently exacting significant “identity costs” from those whose participation, or manner of participation, in politics goes against normative expectations. Mueller concludes that some of the ways in which women in politics seek to minimize these identity costs involve individual strategies through which they enact their conformity to prevailing stereotypes. Others that are undertaken on a collective basis by elected women representatives or civil society organizations or represent institutional innovations on the part of government, such as creating or endorsing women-only associations and institutions as a locus for political action and agency, appear to hold greater potential to disrupt the pre-existing limits on women’s capacity for political agency.

In their analysis of the state and women’s voice and agency, Siobhan Austen and Astghik Mavisakalyan (2015) explore the under-representation of women in parliaments worldwide using a cross-country and cross-section dataset that integrates political and economic variables from the Inter Parliamentary Union, the International Finance Corporation, and the World Development Indicators databased from 2011. Their analysis pivots on the fact that an important expression of agency is having voice in society and influencing policy decisions that affect their lives and well-being. The study explores one potential source of under-representation: the countries’ constitutions. The authors demonstrate that women’s representation in parliaments is larger in countries with constitutional protection from gender-based discrimination. Austen and Mavisakalyan frame their study in the largely dismal record of progress that we have seen in meeting the target set by the United Nations Economic and Social Council in 1990 of having 30 percent or more women in national legislative seats. As of 2014, only 39 countries (21 percent of countries globally) had met this target (World Bank 2014).

The contribution focuses on the role of formal legal institutions in enhancing women’s agency through parliamentary representation. The hypothesis is that constitutional protection from gender-based discrimination can bolster women’s exercise of agency by formalizing their individual and collective rights and providing them with frameworks to exercise their voice (World Bank 2012). Austen and Mavisakalyan draw on earlier work by Georgina Waylen (2006) and Adele Cassola, Amy Raub, Danielle Foley and Jody Heymann (2014) which was concerned with assessing the effectiveness of constitutional change as a strategy for enhancing rights and securing substantive gender freedoms.

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Austen and Mavisakalyan find a positive effect of constitutional protection on women's parliamentary representation which they claim points to a number of conclusions. First, a provision against gender-based discrimination in a constitution may lead to an increased political representation of women directly through the electoral mechanism, placing additional pressure on political parties to have women candidates on their lists. It may also result in more resources devoted to electing women and as a result enhance the capacity of women to launch political careers and get elected. Second, a change in a country's normative political culture may result, leading to more favorable electoral outcomes for women not only through the increased supply of candidates but also through increased participation of women voters and more votes given to women candidates. These results underscore the critical role of constitutional design in promoting women's political agency and suggest that constitution-building processes offer some opportunities to enhance and protect women's political agency.

In the third article in this volume to focus on the state's role in fostering or impeding agency, Goetz and Jenkins (2015), provide an analysis of agency that takes the reader from the micro-level of the individual to the meso-level of institutions and social constructs. The authors make the case that women's participation and agency in peacebuilding depend not only on their own efforts and capabilities, but also on access to resources and opportunities to actually sit at the table and participate in peacebuilding negotiations and operations. For women to manifest agency, they require access to resources and to decision-making opportunities.

The authors discard the conventional wisdom around the gendered construction of women's agency that views women as natural peacemakers given their historical experiences of suppression and their biological facilities for motherhood. Rather, Goetz and Jenkins examine women's efforts to formulate empowerment agendas that embrace women's issues during the post-conflict processes of peacebuilding and national reconstruction in a number of conflict-ridden countries, including Guatemala, Liberia, Libya, Sierra Leone, and Sri Lanka. Even though a number of UN Security Council resolutions have attempted to include women and gender-responsive measures during reconstruction, the design and operation of systems to elect public officials have actually undermined the inclusion of women. While the failure to increase the proportion of women in public office sometimes reflects inconsistencies within the UN between planning in private discussions versus implementation during missions, in many cases the exclusion of women from the peacebuilding effort is determined by deeply ingrained norms around the peacebuilding process. The most privileged category of actors in the mediation process are "spoilers" – individuals and groups who have the ability to instigate disorder out of order and put an end to ceasefire conditions. These

spoilers are often privileged in peace negotiations, and because they generally exclude women from participation, women find it difficult to gain representation at discussions about peace and reconstruction. Moreover, gender equality remains low on the list of priorities of these spoilers during their negotiation efforts.

Hence this article shows how the exclusionary structures and norms around peacebuilding are reflected in conflict resolution, post-conflict elections, and reconstruction efforts. Even the UN, with its own guidelines around temporary special measures that include gendered quotas, has fallen short in adopting gender quotas in the peacebuilding process. The study makes it clear why gender equality is hard to achieve during peace and reconstruction, which can help explain why peacebuilding resolutions and post-conflict reconstruction can be so precarious. The authors argue that what is needed to strengthen women's agency in peacebuilding is to ensure greater opportunities for agency-in-practice; that is, for exclusionary norms in the peacemaking and peacebuilding process to be dropped so that women can exercise voice and agency in peace negotiations, elections, and recovery.

MEASUREMENT AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: CHALLENGES AND TENSIONS

An underlying theme that emerges from these articles and is picked up by Lucia Hanmer and Jeni Klugman (2015), Ana Vaz, Pierre Pratley, and Sabina Alkire (2015), and Kabeer (2015a) in this volume reflects the methodological and empirical challenges implied by a macro-level and comparative quantitative analysis of women's voice and agency. Empirically, agency at the individual and collective level is best captured by variables measuring the outcomes of increased or diminished agency. Hence the measurement of women's agency is commonly related to concepts of gender inequality, where the measures used to capture the different experiences of the sexes represent underlying differences in the amount of voice and agency that women exercise relative to men. In measuring women's agency, Hanmer and Klugman (2015) expand on this idea and underscore that while central notions around agency are well established in the academic literature, progress on the empirical front has faced major challenges around developing tractable measures and increasing data availability and comparability. These challenges have limited our understanding about shared patterns of agency and empowerment of women across countries, as well as our ability to explore path dependence or divergence and points of inflection and correlates of change.

Although complex, this contribution demonstrates that measuring key dimensions of women's agency and empowerment is both important and feasible. Hanmer and Klugman systematically explore what can be

learnt from Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data for fifty-eight countries, representing almost 80 percent of the female population of developing countries. The authors explore correlations between a variety of individual economic, social, and household characteristics and expressions of agency, or the lack thereof, in terms of ability to make reproductive choices, child marriage, control over resources, and individual movement. They also undertake logistic and probabilistic regression analysis on the determinants of reproductive health outcomes, household decision making, freedom of movement, freedom from violence, and ownership of land. The framework takes Amartya Sen's concepts of freedom as the starting point and incorporates the multidimensional and interlocking nature of aspects of agency and constraints through the analysis of these variables and correlates. Following Kabeer (2008a), agency is seen as leading to empowerment, therefore observed expressions or outcomes of empowerment surface as agency in their analysis.

The authors do not aggregate the different aspects of empowerment or agency into a single index, but rather explore the various manifestations of agency, or lack thereof, that can be observed in practice. They include a focus on violence, which they argue is a denial of agency warranting deeper exploration. Finally, appealing to the Pathways research undertaken by Naila Kabeer, with Ragui Assaad, Akosua Darkwah, Simeen Mahmud, Hania Sholkamy, Sakiba Tasneem, and Dzodzi Tsikata (2013), the authors do not emphasize causality but explore a constellation of factors or correlates of agency in different contexts.³ They select domains that are significant in shaping women's ability to pursue their substantive freedoms. The domains selected are: social norms and attitudes; sexual and reproductive health and rights; freedom from gender-based violence; freedom of movement; and control over household resources. Freedom from gender-based violence is seen an essential domain of women's agency both for its intrinsic value in asserting fundamental human rights and for its instrumental value in promoting gender equality in a wide range of outcomes at individual, family, and society levels (Klugman et al. 2014). They examine some key variables that they describe as "empowerment proxies" across fifty-five countries since 2001 and explore their correlation with assets and context, individual education, household wealth, and area of residence. The findings quantify some important correlations between empowerment and individual and household characteristics.

Echoing the work of Wodon, Nguyen, and Tsimpo (2015) in this volume, completing secondary education and beyond has consistently large and positive associations with different proxies of empowerment and agency, underlining the importance of going beyond primary schooling. At an aggregate level, there also appear to be positive links between completing at least secondary schooling as well as household income and employment to measures of empowerment. Women living in richer households are

more likely to demonstrate empowerment and to be assumed to be able to exercise agency but the impact is not as large as that of education. Women's own economic opportunities and earned income also appear to have positive effects on the proxies of empowerment and agency, but again, possibly not as large as expected. In terms of violence, the risk of suffering violence at home was systematically related to the husband's use of alcohol, as well as to the woman's own attitudes to violence. Education has a protective effect against violence but only at secondary and higher levels for women, and with higher education for men. Finally, and not surprisingly, child marriage is associated with increased probability of empowerment and agency deprivations, which supports the increased global attention to this pervasive phenomenon.

Vaz, Pratley, and Alkire's (2015) contribution to this volume explores the challenges of measuring women's empowerment using definitions of autonomy. These authors note that strengthening women's voice and agency is now accepted as a crucial strategy to lessen gender differentials and in particular to improve women's health. Even though the relationship between women's autonomy and health outcomes has been documented in recent scholarship, women's autonomy has not been adequately measured. The study develops a new indicator called the Relative Autonomy Index (RAI) that measures motivational autonomy and the degree to which women face pressure to undertake particular actions in certain domains. Unlike other existing measures of autonomy, this new index does not focus excessively on decision making, while it does pay attention to how women express their values.

The study, which is based on nonparametric techniques and factor and cluster analysis, evaluates several domain-specific RAIs using newly available survey data from the Republic of Chad. This nationally representative dataset includes a number of psychological and subjective well-being indicators proposed by Emma Samman (2007). The eight domains examined include (1) household activities such as cleaning the house or doing laundry; (2) employment in paid work; (3) not being employed; (4) making major household purchases; (5) not making major household purchases; (6) participation in groups; (7) no participation in any group; and (8) feeding infants (women only). An important finding is that on average, women have less autonomous motivation in these eight domains than men. Another striking finding is that measures of relative autonomy appear to be weakly correlated psychological well-being and have no clear relationship with subjective well-being. In fact, the authors find that relative autonomy in some domains is even negatively correlated with indicators of overall life satisfaction and happiness. This finding suggests that researchers should be particularly careful when using indicators of well-being to proxy aspects of autonomy and agency.

Another contribution to this collection that addresses methodological questions concerning agency seeks to spell out some of the micro-level causal pathways through which macro-level relationships might be explained. Kabeer (2015a) picks up on her earlier article with Luisa Natali which sought to synthesize the findings from the macroeconomic studies that explore the impact of gender equality on economic growth as well as those which focused on the impact of economic growth on gender equality (Naila Kabeer and Luisa Natali 2013). This synthesis concluded that while there was strong evidence that gender equality in education and labor force participation appeared to have a positive impact on economic growth, the evidence for the reverse relationship was weak and inconclusive. The highly aggregated, cross-country regressions that characterize these studies make it difficult to explain this puzzling asymmetry in impacts. Consequently, in this volume, Kabeer (2015a) turns to studies carried out at lower levels of analysis, including studies in this special issue, in search of causal mechanisms that might provide an explanation.

The author finds that the positive contribution of gender equality to economic growth appears to operate through the family-mediated pathway, the pervasive and persistent attribution of unpaid care responsibilities to women, particularly to women as mothers and grandmothers, across many different contexts in the world. One result is that an increase in economic resources available to women is likely to translate into investments in children's health and education, and hence the productivity of the next generation of workers. The evidence for the market-mediated pathway is less straightforward. It does not rule out the possibility of such a pathway but suggests that it requires a more demanding set of conditions to materialize. Unlike the family-mediated pathway which can come into operation, even with absolute increases in women's access to resources, the market-mediated pathway is dependent on greater gender equality in access to market opportunities which in turn requires greater equality in the distribution of productive endowments and unpaid domestic responsibilities.

Looking at the reverse relationship, Kabeer suggests a number of reasons explain why economic growth fails to translate into systematically positive impacts on gender equality. The first is that it is the patterns, rather than the pace, of growth that determines the gender distribution of new economic opportunities. The second is that the state has played a greater role in some countries than others in actively redistributing the gains from growth through, for instance, legislative reform and social expenditure. And finally, the impact of growth on gender equality is mediated by a variety of structures of patriarchy that prevail across the world and that curtail women's ability to take advantage of the gains from growth to a greater extent in some contexts than others.

CONCLUSIONS

As this volume demonstrates, the deprivations of voice and agency that characterize the lives of women and girls in much of the world typically result from adverse social norms and dictates regarding the behaviors and substantive freedoms of women. Restrictions on women's voice and agency posed by social norms are often exacerbated by poverty and other sources of socioeconomic disadvantage, as well as by legal discrimination that deny women access to key resources such as land and housing.

This volume focuses primarily on expressions of voice and agency in households and the state. The analysis of voice and agency in markets is under-represented here – drawing attention to the need for further scholarship on women's claims-making and agency in markets as a prominent domain that affects their ability to enter into employment, improve the terms and conditions of their employment, or improve the outcomes from their entrepreneurship initiatives.

The contributions to this volume also underscore that an urgent policy agenda is required to address women's lack of voice and agency, tackling discriminatory laws and extending to policies to expand economic opportunities. Investing in girls' education beyond primary school clearly expands their capabilities and has the potential to enhance agency. Using constitutional provisions and quota systems to increase women's role in political processes is highlighted as having significant potential to foster women's voice and agency in policymaking. Legal initiatives would also help to ensure women have the right to inherit and dispose of property. Ending child marriage by working with religious and community leaders and designing social transfers, social protection, and educational opportunities to postpone marriage should be an important focus of policy and programs to support women and girls' greater agency. Supporting women's more active engagement in peace processes and post-conflict reconstruction will be indispensable to secure lasting and durable peace and promote more inclusive economic policy agenda. Channeling more resources to collective expressions of agency in markets, supporting cooperatives and unions as they make claims on labor and product markets will be essential if we are to improve the terms and conditions of women's employment and entrepreneurship. Finally, acting on social norms construction by engaging in dialogue with key actors that shape and reflect the norms will be critical if we are to change the imagined and the imaginary to include women's full participation and agency.

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NOTES

- ¹ For supporting evidence see Mark Pitt, Shahidur Khandker, and Jennifer Cartwright (2006); Namita Datta (2006); Keera Allendorf (2007); Nidhiya Menon and Yana Rodgers (2011); Carmen Diana Deere and Jennifer Twyman (2012); and Nidhiya Menon, Huong Nguyen, and Yana Rodgers (2014).
- ² For more evidence on the costs of child marriage to individual and collective well-being see Kristin Mammen and Christina Paxson (2000); Eno-Obong Akpan (2003); Judith Bruce (2003); Shelley Clark (2004); Dallan Flake (2005); Kristin Carbone-Lopez, Candace Kruttschnitt, and Ross MacMillan (2006); Jad Chaaban and Wendy Cunningham (2011); Yann Le Strat, Caroline Dubertret, and Bernard Le Foll (2011); Stephan Klasen and Janneke Pieters (2012); United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2012); Jennifer Solotaroff and Rohini Pande (2014) Jeni Klugman, Lucia Hammer, Sarah Twigg, Tazeen Hasan, Jennifer McCleary-Sills, and Julieth Santamaria (2014); and Quentin Wodon (2015).
- ³ See www.pathwaysofempowerment.org/.

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