Chapter 2: Development, Empowerment, and Participation

Empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation, to greater decision-making power and control, and to transformative action. Marilee Karl, *Women and Empowerment*, p.14

In this chapter, I present a broad overview of concepts of empowerment and participation within a development context. I examine empowerment as an alternative form of development, definitions of empowerment, adoption of ‘empowerment’ by the development industry, contradictions within empowerment, and empowerment research concerning NGOs and arts programs. This discussion seeks to identify what is already known about the extent that NGO-run capacity-building programs affect participants’ images of themselves and their roles within households, communities, and the economy.

Framing this research within the context of empowerment places it squarely in terms of what John Friedmann termed “the emerging practice of an alternative development with its claims to inclusive democracy, appropriate economic growth, gender equality, and intergenerational equity.” (1992, p. vi) In an attempt to move from top-down frameworks of imposed development models, empowerment places the emphasis on local people, local contexts, and local forms of power and change. This is not to say that there is no element of top-down facilitation and pressure involved, particularly when bilateral and multilateral aid agencies (e.g. the World Bank) as well as international NGOs adopt the development rhetoric of empowerment. However, the intention is to focus on “people as active subjects of their own history” (Friedmann, 1992, p. vi) and as participatory active voices in their own development.

While power is clearly the core concept within empowerment, I do not extensively examine detailed conceptualizations of power within the scope of this research. Suffice to say that this thesis adopts the idea that power in society is a variable sum and that empowerment of a previously powerless group does not necessarily entail negative effects or a decrease in power for the powerful. Comprehensive empowerment does, however, require challenging the structures of society that block widespread empowerment and development. In this case the powerful would undoubtedly be required
to give up some of their power but rather than a simple reallocation and rebalancing as in a zero-sum conceptualization, I assume that the reformulation of societal structures leads to the redress of societal power imbalances.

When examining different types of empowerment, it is important to recognize at the outset that they are not mutually exclusive and instead tend to be mutually reinforcing. For example, economic forms of empowerment where people gain jobs and economic benefit link directly to individual feelings of self-confidence and personal empowerment. The act of being involved in the job market, presumably interacting with various individuals also contributes positively to social forms of empowerment. Similarly, increased personal empowerment enhances the ability to be engaged with society and increases the chances of both social and economic empowerment. Different forms of empowerment should be identified and understood not in isolation but rather as potentially and probably inter-related dynamics.

**Alternative Development**

As this thesis focuses on empowerment within a development context, it is important to first delimit a working definition of development. I adopt a human development approach, accepting Sen’s idea that development should be “a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy.” (1999, p. 3) After six decades of failed development approaches, empowerment and its inherent participatory perspective offer a compelling alternative development paradigm.

The Global Recession (as Nicolas Kristof calls it) presents an opportunity to re-evaluate the global capital system and the role of development approaches therein. If our system is leading to more poverty with fewer social welfare nets within the so-called developed world—many European governments adopting austerity measures, for example—what is it doing to the ‘developing’ world? This question has been answered by academics such as Lindio-McGovern and Wallimann who insist that “neoliberal globalization is not a neutral process, it is gendered, and has exacerbated domestic and global social inequalities.” (2009, p. 1) They also claim that by re-evaluating
globalization and the role of ‘development;’ it is possible to work towards social justice, countering current trends reinforcing global injustice.

While the term ‘empowerment’ has become somewhat of a buzzword, I argue that it has a great deal of validity and applicability. The approach accepts the political nature of development relationships, analyses local people’s situations from their own perspectives, and takes account of global and historical power inequalities. (Porter, 1999, p. 11) Empowerment represents the final stage in Moser’s five-stage conceptualization of policy approaches concerning women: welfare, equity, anti-poverty, efficiency, and empowerment. The approach attempts to succeed where other development approaches have failed, by embracing participation. (Moser, 1989, pp. 1806-1817)

The bottom-up perspective endemic to empowerment approaches is in line with participatory forms of development, at least as far as ideals are concerned. In reality, development agencies and organizations often try to empower people, but if adhering to the original intention of the approach, people cannot be empowered from outside; they can only empower themselves. Agencies and organizations can facilitate empowerment, making the space, creating the conditions, removing the barriers, and encouraging empowerment efforts but empowerment must come from within to actually be empowering. Specific actions do not lead to empowerment; rather it is the context in which these actions and decisions are taken which facilitate and promote empowerment (Oxaal, 1997, p. 7)

**Towards a Working Definition of Empowerment**

Despite its long history, first on the fringes of development theory and now in its role as ‘mainstream darling’ of the development industry, empowerment remains poorly defined and only vaguely comprehended. This is partly because it is by necessity a contextually located process and outcome and can therefore only be understood in terms of specific contexts and in consultation with the people supposedly being empowered. Despite this ambiguity, empowerment as a concept has gained development currency in the past few decades as the focus has shifted to participatory approaches within the global development context. The language of empowerment, which emerged out of small-scale
populist NGOs, has been appropriated by large mainstream organizations including the World Bank (Parpart, 2002, 41) To a certain extent this reflects the widespread understanding that participation and empowerment “are the essential building blocks for grassroots, people-oriented transformative development.” (Parpart, 2002, p. 44) Empowerment is a process of change that focuses on expanding the range of choices that people can make. As such, it cannot be understood as a single dimensional formula for change, either as process or outcome. It must instead be understood in particular contexts taking into account the specific needs of the people intended to be empowered. (Kabeer, 1998) Empowerment and disempowerment are both processes and outcomes. Neither the processes nor outcomes are clear, unidirectional, or simple, instead involving immense complexity regarding power over resources and the power to make decisions. (Datta and Kornberg, 2002, pp. 2-4)

Moffat et. al. (1995, p. 234) provide what is probably the most comprehensive view of power, the central concept within empowerment. They note that power operates in four distinct ways:

- **power-over**: involves an either/or controlling relationship of domination and subordination based on the notion that amounts of power are fixed and power exchanges thereby necessitate a zero-sum game. This form of power involves the creation of simple dualities, threats of violence, intimidation, and active and passive resistance.
- **power-within**: this involves spiritual strength based in self-acceptance, self-respect, self-esteem, self-awareness, consciousness raising, self-confidence, and assertiveness. Respect for self is extended to respect for and acceptance of others as equals, recognizing complexity and complementarity.

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1 This is often referred to as “The Rowlands Framework” and has become popularly associated with Jo Rowlands. The framework was first outlined by Moffat et. al. and later quoted in an Oxfam gender training manual, among other places (Oxaal, 1997; Rowalands, 1997). Rowlands herself acknowledges the original reference (Rowlands, 1997, p. 145)
• **power-to**: is creative, productive, and enabling and considered *the essence of individual empowerment*. It involves capacity building, decision-making authority, leadership, the power to understand how things work, and problem-solving skills.

• **power-with**: this is a collective form of power where people feel empowered by organizing and uniting around a common purpose or understanding. It involves a sense of whole greater than the sum of individuals.

As Williams et. al. (1994, pp. 233-4) explain when examining this framework, **power-over** is the prevailing and most common conceptualization and yet is the most destructive and antithetical to development. They recommend other forms of power be explored within development in order to engender positive forms of empowerment. Similarly, they emphasize that “Men also benefit from the results of women’s empowerment with the chance to live in a more equitable society and explore new roles.” (Oxaal, 1997, p. iv) This framework, encouraging the shift from a hierarchical power-over conceptualization towards equitable individual **power-within** and **power-to** understandings of empowerment form the theoretical framework for my research. The concept of **power-with** is also important, particularly when understanding collective forms of empowerment, which my research also addresses. This study emphasizes **power-within** as a starting point for different forms of empowerment, specifically **power-with** and **power-to**. It assumes a movement from individual awakening and strength to the ability to associate productively with others and to engage in new activities and problem solve.

Empowerment can also be understood in a variety of different frameworks: individual and collective (Moser, 1989; Touwen, 1996); psychological, social, and political (Friedmann; 1992); cognitive, psychological, political, and economic (Stromquist, 2002); economic, social, political, cultural; and in local, national, and global terms (Parpart et. al., 2002). While Freire did not formally comment on empowerment, his ideas of “conscientization” are compatible with empowerment because this notion of a “deep awareness of one’s socio-political environment is really a precursor to the development of empowering skills and feelings.” (Stromquist, 2002, p. 22)
When assessing different forms of empowerment, many scholars focus on communal and collective empowerment to the neglect of individual empowerment. I admit that in order to effect long-term change and societal transformation, collective empowerment that forms the basis for challenging existing power structures must be pursued. However, as Reza explains, “In developing countries empowerment of necessity must first be about self…the empowerment of self is a necessary precursor of, but not an alternative to, the common good.” (2003, p. 458)

Numerous definitions of empowerment focus on the foundational concept of autonomy (Friedmann, 1992; Touwen, 1996). Friedmann notes that the empowerment approach “places the emphasis on autonomy in the decision-making of territorially organized communities, local self-reliance (but not autarchy), direct (participatory) democracy, and experiential social learning.” (1992, p. vii) Friedmann further refines his definition of empowerment, focusing on a triad of key areas—psychological, social, and political—which need to be accessed in order to overcome poverty and promote genuine empowerment. (p. 116) This definition is complemented by Touwen’s discussions concerning individual and collective forms of empowerment because Friedmann’s psychological empowerment is individual while social and political empowerment are collective. Touwen explains that there are individual (individual and socio-economic) and collective (political and socio-cultural) forms of autonomy. She goes on to conceptualize empowerment as the process through which individuals and communities achieve autonomy, insisting on the building of self-reliance, self-confidence, organizations, and social alliances. (1996, pp. 18-20) Stern et. al. (2006, p. 242) echo this sentiment, arguing that empowerment involves both the growth of individual opportunity as well as the removal of external constraints on seizing opportunity. In this thesis, I focus on both individual and collective forms of autonomy, accepting that they are inter-related and that individual-level impacts have wider ranging implications for collective levels.

Other definitions of empowerment include those stressing participation by people in decisions and processes shaping their lives; participating in the market economy; challenging inequality and oppression; the liberation of both men and women; and
empowerment as bottom-up process which cannot be bestowed from the top-down. (Oxaal, 1997, p. iii)

Looking at the individual level, Stern et. al. define empowerment “as having the ability to shape one’s life.” (2006, p. 102) They offer a more engaged version of this, explaining that empowered people “can participate effectively in the economy and the society” (p. 99) which, it will be seen later can bring a number of other contradictions. Nevertheless, this ability to engage is facilitated by individual abilities but is concomitantly restricted by external societal constraints (family, economy, society, cultural, political context) and internal individual constraints (preferences and self-perceptions). In order to enhance empowerment within this framework, therefore, projects, policies, and institutions may enhance individual abilities, reduce societal constraints, or remove individual constraints.

Having delineated the framework for understanding empowerment, it is necessary to investigate ways to recognize and evaluate empowerment on the ground. Kabeer sees empowerment as a positive change in the ability to make choices, echoing Sen’s capabilities framework. It is also important that that there are alternatives to choose from and that they are perceived as real alternatives. (Kabeer, 2005; Rowlands, 1997) These choices manifest in terms of agency (process of choice), resources (medium of agency), and achievements (outcomes of agency). (2005, pp. 13-14) On a functional level, Kabeer specifies access to education, paid work, and political representation as important elements in facilitating empowerment, if undertaken in analytical, non-exploitative and broad-based contexts. Therefore, while there can be various paths and processes to empowerment, this perspective specifically identifies choosing from a range of alternatives as empowerment process and outcome. Building on Kabeer’s focus on choice, Steady prioritizes the mobilization of political, economic, education, human, social, and cultural resources as key to empowerment, both inside and outside of formal political processes. (2006, p. 18)

Evaluating empowerment is a key issue in development and still has not been resolved. This is in large part because empowerment manifests differently depending on the situation and individuals involved. Hashemi et. al. (1996) list a range of
empowerment indicators—in addition to Kabeer’s choice ability described above—including mobility, economic security, the ability to make small and large purchases, involvement in major household decisions, relative freedom from domination within the family, political and legal awareness, and involvement in political campaigning and protests. Regardless of whether the empowerment project targets people collectively or individually; psychologically, socially, politically, or economically; the empowerment projects should be designed and evaluated in close consultation with those participants to be empowered. However, empowerment has been appropriated by the World Bank, UN, and other development agencies and incorporated into top-down approaches rather than remaining closely connected with its participatory roots.

### Appropriation by the Development Industry

From being an alternative approach to development, the empowerment approach has been widely adopted by mainstream development agencies, more to achieve immediate development objectives than to engender widespread social transformation. (Parpart, et. al, 2002, p. 3) *The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* specifically state that

> Women’s empowerment and full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace.  
> UN, 1996, para. 13

Working within this framework, many mainstream development organizations now prioritize empowerment as part of wider development approaches. In its *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction Sourcebook* from 2002, the World Bank takes an institutional approach to empowerment, defining it as “the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives.” (Deepa, 2002, p. vi) As such, the World Bank focuses on removing the institutional barriers to improving people’s well-being, individually or collectively. The four specific empowerment elements focused on by the Bank are access to information, inclusion/participation, accountability, and local
The arts and crafts projects investigated in this research take a somewhat different approach, focusing instead on inclusion and participation as a first step to accessing information, demanding accountability, and developing local capacity.

The United Nations focuses typically on women in its empowerment approaches, focusing on issues self-worth; the right to have and to determine choices; the right to have access to opportunities and resources; the right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and the ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally. (POPIN, n.d. Section 4) The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights encourages a human rights approach to empowerment and participation, noting that “Empowerment requires the recognition that people are the prime agents of development and need to be part of the transformation of the structures and the overcoming of the obstacles that have created or contributed to poverty.” (UNDP, 2010, p. 17) The UN recognizes that empowerment initiatives often involve lip-service, with stakeholders being handpicked. Instead, the Commissioner for Human Rights says “decision makers should reach out to the poorest, remotest and most excluded groups, and actively invest in capacity-building and institutionalizing participation through existing democratic institutions.” (2010, p. 28)

While these are commendable recommendations, implementation and monitoring on the ground may not involve the requisite commitment or follow-through. As Chambers and Pettit explain, “partnership, empowerment, ownership, participation, accountability and transparency – imply changes in power and relationships, but have not been matched in practice.” (2004, p. 137) In fact, the appropriation of empowerment rhetoric may do more harm than good because the terms may now have less meaning. Along this line of reasoning, Chambers and Pettit comment that they may be “little more than fashionable labels attached to the same underlying systems.” (2004, p. 138) An Institute of Development Studies report of 2001 finds that rather than challenging previous ways of implementing development schemes, aid agencies instead continue to impose top-down hierarchical control with conditionalities while simultaneously
preaching empowerment. (2001, p. 1) This criticism extends to non-profit agencies as well because all too often external development actors are unwilling or unable to abdicate authority over the poor and prefer to frame empowerment strategies on their own terms while unconsciously undervaluing local knowledge and capacities. (Parpart, 2002, p. 48)

As Woost puts it, “we are still riding in a top-down vehicle of development whose wheels are greased with a vocabulary of bottom-up discourse.” (1997, p. 249)

The generic concept of empowerment has become part of top-down, external, development processes, but effective and politically transformative empowerment requires grass roots, internal processes of developmental change. The discourse of empowerment is not enough to ensure appropriate change where it is required; official rhetoric and top-down funding do not challenge the hegemony of development discourse and as such we should not be misled by the discourse of empowerment. (Staudt) Instead, we must be vigilantly aware of the construction and production of development and empowerment discourse, avoiding what Staudt refers to as “rebottling in the empowerment language” (2002: 109). Whether we are representatives of the powerful ‘developed’ world or the power-restricted ‘developing’ world, we must engage actively to facilitate and participate more in challenging existing power relations at local, national, and global levels, using agency to embody and expand the discourse and actions of truly empowered development.

**Participation as Key**

Empowerment insists on the primacy of the target population’s participation in any intervention affecting its welfare. It is the antithesis of paternalism.

Swift, 1984, p. xiv

A key element to empowerment being facilitated effectively on the ground is participation. Touwen’s research on urban and rural woman in Zambia in the 1990s noted that participation can change NGOs from “the bringers of good fortune…to NGOs as catalysts for self-development.” (1996, p. 171) Participation is one of a number of areas
being investigated in this researched, to discover whether Boitumelo Project functions as a catalyst for self-development.

Participation may imply either individual or collective agency. Discourse on women’s studies assumes that there is ‘solidarity of women’ but this ignores the myriad social, economic, political, individual positions of women and that each of them has different needs and interests and ways of trying to meet both. As such, participation should be assumed always to involve a collective endeavor but should include individualized iterations as needed by specific situations. The act of participation is also important in that it moves people from being passive objects to subjects active in the managing of development within their communities.

Building from this, participation in the form of resistance against inequitable power structures may lead to empowerment regardless of how the resistance is framed and labeled. Social change is a slow but incremental process and activists should not be impatient. Despite decades-long calls for domestic work to be ‘counted,’ for example (see Waring, 1988), it still is not, leading many academics and activists alike to conclude that “the shifts in policy frameworks are not happening…the disconnect continues.” (Rai, 2008, p. 177) Rather than becoming disheartened, however, Rai (2008) and Steady (2006) argue for struggles to open up new spaces where people can think ‘other-wise’, arguing that action and reaction to development-underdevelopment and democratization-authoritarianism is in itself empowering. (Rai, 2008; Steady, 2006) Touwen (1996, p.205) comes to the same conclusion, using the concept of reflexive monitoring to support her convictions that people reflect on their environments and are therefore capable of being agents of change, which in turn leads to a form of empowerment greater than the restrictions imposed by power relations and social structures. (1996, p. 205)

Having argued that agency, autonomy, and self-reflexive action are possible within restrictive hegemonies of power and social relations, I note that this is a difficult process and that the boundaries imposed by discourse still exist. In fact, rather than being empowering, many ‘development’ projects have the opposite effect, as will be discussed below.
Contradictions within Empowerment Theories and Practices

In the developing world there is no such thing as an unemployed woman.
Queen Rania, The Jordan Times, 23 September, 2010

It is important to note that while the concept of empowerment represents a welcome progression from state-led top-down development approaches, it has limitations and encompasses widespread complexities that are often overlooked. Large development organizations and scholars alike may tout the benefits of empowerment, recommending it almost to the level of panacea of development challenges, but there are myriad potential disadvantages to the approach that must be addressed. When paired with entry into the global market, empowerment becomes a tool for exposing a previously isolated population to the exploitative, unequal, neo-liberal mechanisms of the international economy, particularly when women are paid lower wages than their male counterparts for the same skill sets and performance levels. Pearson (2007, p. 202) argues that these issues will not be resolved until we “challenge the assumption that women can become empowered solely by selling their labour or their products for money.”

In women-focused micro-credit schemes, empowerment frameworks often lead to an increased economic burden on women without a concomitant decrease in domestic and gendered duties or a change in household bargaining power over how to spend the increased income. Parmar (2003, p. 471) explains that even much-celebrated ‘women’s empowerment programs’ such as the Grameen Bank’s micro-finance schemes “reinforce and entrench existing social hierarchies and relationships of exploitation” rather than challenging the patriarchal social systems that present real structural barriers to lasting transformation. Lairup-Fonderson (2002) discusses how micro-enterprise projects actually empower the market economy instead of the women involved. The projects force women to adhere to meetings, rules, disciplines, timetables, and development norms. She also comments that women in these micro-credit programs rarely graduate from loans or move to more profitable businesses and that much of the impact remains only marginal in household, market, and/or political realms. (Lairap-Fonderson, 2002, pp. 185-6) Zaman goes so far as to say that the socio-economic gains achieved by garment workers in
Bangladesh were undercut by “exploitation including lower wages, gender discrimination, harassment, job insecurity, and hazardous work environments.” (1999, p. 169) Kabeer (1998) notes that micro-credit programs in Bangladesh had positive impacts on a range of levels, including personal, familial, and relationships with the rest of the community. All of the changes, however, were directly linked to and interpreted in terms of economic income, to the neglect of studies concerning changes in self-worth and community value irrespective of financial resource access. Similarly, issues concerning increased ability to identify choices and alternate strategies for dealing with inequality in daily life are not addressed by micro-enterprise and myriad other empowerment projects. This research aims to address this gap. While numerous studies have shown that micro-credit programs (Kabeer, 1998; Zaman, 1999; Lairap-Fonderson, 2002) lead to various forms of direct and indirect empowerment, mainly related to increases in economic income and the management of this income, I am interested in find out if there are non-economic aspects worth investigating.

As with many third sector programs aimed at improving lives in lieu of the public sector, this can often lead to the state neglecting its efforts to provide services, as women are able to use extra income to pay more for private health care and other services. Lairap-Fonderson addresses this, noting that economic empowerment has led to people “taking responsibility for social welfare services abdicated by governments under structural adjustment programs” and allowing the governments to ignore their political responsibility to vulnerable populations. (2002, pp. 184-5) Steady reiterates this argument, insisting that NGO involvement in empowerment, gender, and development reduces requirements for governments to be accountable. (2006, p. 9) These forms of empowerment worsen the situation of women who have increased power to participate in the exploitative and unequal system but not enough to challenge and transform it. This in itself, it could be argued, is a function of incomplete empowerment, where there is individual and even collective economic forms of empowerment but this has not been translated into wider and stronger forms of political empowerment which would allow previously marginalized populations to challenge the status quo. As Touwen explains, “Empowerment should bring people…more of a say in the direction of development.”
However, in reality this means this changing the current power structures concerning development decisions, which is unlikely to be a simple process.

Braun (2005) has shown that ‘development’ projects have gendered social impacts that reproduce and reinforce gendered social interests and established hierarchies, particularly concerning control of and access to natural resources and geographical domains. Other scholars go so far as to perceive the ‘empowerment agenda’ as “a project which secretes an insidious form of power, subjugating and subjectifying its objects in the process of fabricating them as ‘subjects.” (Kelsall and Mercer, 2003, p. 295) As such, Steady (2006, p. 19) is a proponent of alternative development which opposes the idea of integrating women into the exploitative global political economy. Instead, alternative development argues for mobilizing women to challenge social structures; strengthening women’s skills, education, and training; and promoting women’s rights and access to resources such as land, facilities, and services. (2006, 19) Boitumelo Project, while not outwardly promoting a direct challenge and transformation of social structures, encourages critical thinking concerning social norms, focuses on strengthening women’s skills and capacities, and promotes women’s access to facilities, services, and networks. On a different note, even the most successful empowerment programs and attempts to encourage increased autonomy face inherent barriers in the daily realities that can undercut wider initiatives. For example, often pursuit of daily interests (e.g. making ends meet) undercut broader goals to transform societal structures. People regularly make power trade-offs for immediate convenience, which is tantamount to accepting the extant unequal power relations in order to achieve short-term gains, while sacrificing long term achievements. Friedmann (1992, viii), for example, explores how social, political, and economic forces on local, regional, and global levels act to constrain local action and local empowerment by creating barriers to sustainable and transformative local empowerment and development.

Similarly, focusing entirely on autonomy and agency in empowerment efforts is often insufficient because there are numerous socio-political structures which frame and limit the efficacy of individual agency. As such, women’s empowerment in particular, poses no threat to the status quo while reducing the burden on men and governments;
simultaneously keeping women fundamentally dependent while benefiting from their extra labor. (Lairup-Fonderson, 2002, p. 185)

Another contradiction inherent in the notion of empowerment is the idea that people can be empowered by outside actors. (Parmar, 2003; Kelsall and Mercer, 2003) For change to be long-term and sustainable it must be driven by local people in search of their own ends by their own means. Despite claims by development organizations and contemporary development discourse to the contrary, empowerment manifested as external actors ‘installing’ internal desires and capacities for individual and community autonomy is unlikely to succeed in effecting desirable change in the long-term. (Kelsall and Mercer, 2003, p. 293)

Empowerment studies and efforts also need to remember that program participants often form both a subordinate category—of people who have historically lacked access to formal education and societal structures of power—and a diverse group of individuals. The impact of empowerment programs will therefore reflect their historical position within the subordinate group as well as individual reactions as a result of personal historical experiences. (Kabeer, 1998) Finally, when evaluating empowerment programs, it is important to focus on the perspectives of the intended beneficiaries of the programs. (Kabeer, 1998)

**NGOs and Empowerment**

A key area of research of importance for this thesis is that of capacity-building programs being run for adults outside of the realm of the formal education sector. Stromquist has noted the importance of these forms of programs for empowerment.

It is with adult women outside of formal education that empowerment at present reaches its highest forms. Not only are adults more capable of reflective thought—typically derived from family, work and other everyday experiences—but they can also acquire new knowledge in less restrictive and more creative settings.

Stromquist, 2002, p. 26

Stromquist goes on to explain that perhaps even more than the specific skills being transferred, these programs are important because they provide alternative spaces
in which to access short-term, systematic learning opportunities. In addition, workshops offered are often directly relevant to participants and facilitate empowerment: gender subordination, reproductive health, domestic violence, gender and legislation, gender and politics, and others. Gains in self-confidence (psychological empowerment) arise not from the specific skills being learned but rather from the creation of a space in which people can discuss problems with others, exchange viewpoints, create bonds and trust, and formulate constructive and empowering strategies for dealing with issues. One basic skill that participants develop, for example, is the ability to speak in public—developing confidence when sharing their ideas and opinions. Stromquist notes that these spaces also provide the basis for informal learning through mobilization, organization, role modeling, community participation, and testing one’s leadership. (2002, p. 26) As such, these non-threatening physical and social spaces facilitate individual and collective empowerment and lay the foundation for future initiatives in political empowerment.

Salo (2010, p. 43) notes that some skills are offered at many NGOs, including computer skills and arts and crafts. However, few of these include tracking systems to establish whether counseling and training offered to the women have assisted them in becoming independent—and therefore empowered—in the long term. So-called empowerment projects must be evaluated in terms of outcomes and with close objective reference to the project participants and their needs rather than referring overwhelmingly to development actors and whether their own agency goals are being met.

**Empowerment and the Arts**

NGOs have long used the visual arts (particularly drama) to educate people, particularly in health education and as a peace-building tool. There has also been research on embroidery and arts projects as skill-building, income-generating projects. However, little research has been conducted on embroidery projects and their impact on healing and
empowerment in developing societies. Similarly, storytelling as a healing process and means of discussing issues needs to be explored more.

While there is relatively scant literature specifically concerning empowerment and arts projects, particularly in South Africa, there are some that deal directly with arts projects as anti-poverty initiatives. Miller (2007) has examined relationships of women’s poverty, representation, and power, specifically exploring visual culture as a point of activation for self-expression, self-realization, agency, and activism. Miller’s study looked at a women’s art-making cooperative in an urban township in the Cape province of South Africa. The project brought together unemployed mothers of children under five to attend a three-month skills-training class in textile design, painting, and printing. The goal of the project was to create product that would be sold locally and internationally, therefore combating child malnutrition and raising families out of poverty. The artists in the cooperative are concerned both with economic circumstances and self-representation. The artworks, however, are usually group efforts created through a collaborative process so do not necessarily represent and reflect individual concerns or engagement with social issues. Miller (2007, p. 132) claims that the artworks “enhance the possibilities for gender justice by depicting the unique experiences of impoverished women in post-apartheid South Africa,” considering them representations of “feminist activist art.” She argues that “the very act of representing oneself as dignified and empowered is a necessary and politically significant act.” This has meaning for the participants in Boitumelo as well, even if they may not consider themselves part of the tradition of South African resistance artists or engaged in political struggle. They are, however “creating and embracing economic viability and the ability of visual culture to celebrate, resist, instruct, and empower.”

Much of the research that discusses handicraft-based development projects focus mainly on maximizing the income generation aspect of the project and therefore the

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2 The exception to this is Brenda Schmahmann’s research into the empowerment impacts of the Mapula project in Winterveld, South Africa (2006). Having said this, she does focus on economic issues to a far greater degree than the subsequent case study—Boitumelo Project.
economic empowerment impact for participants. (Pereira et. al. 2006) My research aims to broaden this research horizon, focusing on arts-and-crafts programs to understand related forms of empowerment that do not center on income generation.

Having explored the empowerment approach as an alternative form of development with particular reference to definitions, use by mainstream and third sector development agencies, and inherent contradictions, I have outlined some research gaps concerning non-economic empowerment impact as relates to NGO-run programs, specifically within the arts sector. The following chapters seek to contribute to research on non-profit arts-and-crafts programs, using an empowerment lens to examine changes in participants’ lives as a result of the programs.