



# Gender and capacity building: A multi-layered study of empowerment

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## ABSTRACT

This study shifts the focus from building individual capacities to understanding the relational acts through which empowerment and education acquire their value and meaning. Conceptually, the paper employs social cognitive theory to explore the interplay between social learning, relational agency, and culture. This interplay builds the foundation for the development of an empowerment model of capacity building that proposes an interlinked system of community capacity and empowerment dimensions. The model is explored in the context of the Education for All project in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco. The research combines participant observation, qualitative interviews and visual methods to provide rich insights to situated knowledges of learning and empowerment. Findings reveal that the meaning of education equates to the capacity to aspire to a different life. This problematizes the way gender and gender relations are understood in the rural Berber villages. The girls' education unsettles the repeating cycle of female educational deprivation, and leads them to become role models within their communities. This instills the image of educated women in community consciousness, leading to an incipient change in perceptions of what girls and women can be and do.

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## 1. Introduction

This study engages with the micro-politics of gender and learning to investigate how capacity building in rural communities can enhance empowerment. It explores the complex interdependencies between individual and collective community capacities and the ways in which these also engender experiences of disempowerment. Traditional approaches to capacity building emphasize the role of education and training in knowledge transfer (Vallejo & Wehn, 2016). Chaskin, Brown, Venkatesh, and Vidal (2001, p. 7) define the term capacity as building on the notion “of both containing (holding, storing) and ability (of mind, of action).” This definition reflects the belief that some resources or capitals, such as human or physical capital, are readily available within a community. However, the underlying concept – that needed resources “reside” both within the individual and the collective, and that community capacity provides the foundation of these processes – is also problematic. It fails to capture the ways in which community capacities are not equally available, accessible and distributed among social groups. The terms capacity building, community development, and empowerment are often used interchangeably

to describe “a process that increases the assets and attributes which a community is able to draw upon in order to improve their lives” (Gibbon, Labonte, & Laverack, 2002, p. 485). This conflation indicates that a well-defined conceptualization of the relationship between capacity building and empowerment and their respective effects on development is missing.

Understanding the underlying community dynamics that drive these processes can be considered a pre-condition for identifying and engaging in effective capacity building. Far from representing homogenous or stable groups (Botchway, 2001), communities are defined by geographical and socio-cultural factors. Within them, social groups have different attributes and endowments of assets (Chaskin et al., 2001). In particular, women and girls are often disadvantaged in access to training and education (World Bank, 2011). There are, however, limited ethnographic studies of educational initiatives for girls (Shah, 2016). These could provide a more nuanced understanding of the complexities underpinning learning and empowerment (see also Moreno, Noguchi, & Harder, 2017).

This research aims to address this gap by studying capacity building within the context of the “Education for All” (EFA) project. The project provides boarding houses for girls from poor families living in remote villages of the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco. It was established in 2007 by tourism organizations operating in the area with the intention of improving female access to education. At present, five boarding houses operate in Asni, Ouirgane

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and Talat n'Yacoub in the province of Al-Haouz in the Marrakech-Safi region. Each house accommodates 30 to 36 girls, who are between ages 12 and 19. Almost all students are Berber and Muslim, reflecting the demographic composition of the area. The complex manifestations of both Islam and oral Berber culture influence local gender norms and community hierarchies (Sadiqi, 2003).

The theme of the project harmonizes with the “Education for All” goals of the Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000). However, while the latter focus exclusively on schools, most of the capacity development in the EfA project occurs outside the classroom. The EfA learning philosophy is based on providing individualized care and support and a cooperative learning environment for girls. It operates in a culturally conforming way as a predominantly female environment. The project further relies on international volunteers who serve as mentors and role models for the girls. These interpersonal learning processes cater not only to the girls' schooling needs, but also to the goal of enabling girls to become confident, capable and aware young women.

This research explores the ways in which education can bring opportunity and capacity building for girls. It provides three original contributions to theory and knowledge. First, it critiques existing conceptualizations of community capacity that focus predominantly on community assets and attributes. Instead, this paper adopts a lens that interlinks empowerment dimensions and community capacities on different levels. Second, it draws on social cognitive theory to broaden the understanding of socially embedded and networked learning and empowerment processes. Third, it expands the current empirical literature in this field, which focuses predominantly on adults. The paper provides an in-depth examination of girls' capacity development in Berber communities, and analyzes the ensuing effects on gender dynamics and community capacities.

To present key, original contributions, the paper proceeds as follows: The first section presents a literature review that examines the diverse and intersectional experiences of learning and empowerment, and builds the foundation for the development of an empowerment model of capacity building. The second section presents the methodology guiding this research. The third section discusses the findings. The final section concludes, reflects on the limitations of this study, and indicates potential areas for future research.

## 2. Capacity building through the lens of empowerment

Education is one of the main factors contributing to women's empowerment, as highlighted in the “Gender Equality and Development Report 2012” (World Bank, 2011). Education increases individuals' overall access to opportunities in life, and is considered a key correlate of empowerment (Gammage, Kabeer, & Rodgers, 2016; Hanmer & Klugman, 2016; Samman & Santos, 2009; Subrahmanian, 2005). However, formal educational systems also replicate social norms, dominant values and drivers. These can further entrench inequality and disempowerment in society by reproducing existing hierarchies and exclusions (Bivens, Moriarty, & Taylor, 2009). An assessment of educational processes requires an engagement with the in/formal geographies underpinning learning experiences and the negotiation of community capacities and values therein. This study focuses on education as a form of capacity development that builds on cognitive, social and cultural processes. It thereby transcends the formal and informal structures of both school and community to explore opportunities for growth, aspiration and empowerment of girls. A short introduction to the concepts and theories informing the empowerment model of capacity building developed in this study follows (see Fig. 1).

### 2.1. Capacity-building theory

Capacity building is most commonly defined as a process having different dimensions or levels complemented by a specific aim (Simmons, Reynolds, & Swinburn, 2011). Attributes of community capacity apply to persons, and to broader communities in ways that surpass the individual and encompass relationships and groups (Kwan, Frankish, Quantz, & Flores, 2003). Community capacity building is further based on specific capitals or domains. Authors usually describe between four and nine aspects, such as skills and knowledge, sense of community, social structures, resources, participation, leadership, and community awareness (see e.g. Chaskin et al., 2001; Gibbon et al., 2002). This conceptualization reflects that capacity-building processes rely and build on existing abilities or capabilities within a community and on available resources (cf. Vallejo & Wehn, 2016). Chaskin et al. (2001) find a lack of clarity on how these different aspects relate to each other (for a rare exception, see Moreno et al., 2017). The model in Fig. 1 shows how the mutually imbricated processes of empowerment and learning are influenced by and influence community capacities at different levels.

### 2.2. Social cognitive theory

Social cognitive theory provides an avenue through which to study not only environmental determinants, but also the psychological foundations of learning and implicit empowerment (Bandura, 1997). This provides a perspective of capacity development that is sensitive to cultural experiences, reflective thought, and the social embeddedness of change. Social cognitive theory acknowledges the influence of local culture on constructions of knowledge and meaning making (Vygotsky, 1978). It holds that social interaction is key to a person's cognitive development by emphasizing the role of guided and observational learning through social modeling (Bandura, 1998). It focuses on “developmental changes across the life span in terms of involvement and exercise of human agency” (Bandura, 2006, p. 1). Self-efficacy beliefs function as a key mechanism of agency. They represent the perceived capacity to act, which influences human functioning through motivational, cognitive and affective processes (Bandura, 1991). This underpins the exercise of control that rests on individuals or groups' belief in their causative capability (Bandura, 1997).

### 2.3. Empowerment theory

Empowerment, like capacity building, is a multilevel construct that includes both processes and outcomes. This study explores empowerment on three interconnected levels: the individual, relationship and collective (adapted from Rowlands, 1997). It integrates an agentic perspective of the self in line with the broader definition of empowerment as “the expansion of freedom of choice and action to shape one's life” (Narayan, 2002, p. xviii). Motivated by Sen's capability approach (1985, 1999), many scholars emphasize the importance of agency in conceptions of empowerment (see e.g. Gammage et al., 2016; Hanmer & Klugman, 2016; Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007; Samman & Santos, 2009). This study focuses on the development of agency along a control-choice continuum ranging from a person or a group's perceived inability to act or choose, and toward an increasing sense of control over taking certain actions (Bandura, 1997) and making certain choices (Kabeer, 2005). This is an inherently relational process (cf. Christens, 2012; Rao, 2017) shaped by changes from within, i.e., psychological empowerment, and socio-structural influences operating through the terms of recognition (adapted from Appadurai, 2004). These terms capture the dynamic interaction between empowerment processes, values, norms and discourses that are

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