

Agency and Empowerment: Embodied Realities in a Globalized World

Christine M. Koggel

(to appear in *Agency and Embodiment* edited by Sue Campbell, Susan Sherwin, and Letitia Maynell, forthcoming, 2007)

Introduction

Many development theorists and policy makers now reject well-being approaches that treat people in developing countries as passive recipients of aid in favor of agency approaches that treat people as active participants who can and ought to shape and control their own lives. In *Development as Freedom*, Amartya Sen argues that people “need not be seen primarily as passive recipients of the benefits of cunning development programs” (Sen 1999, 11) and that they should be treated as agents who “can effectively shape their own destiny and help each other” (Sen 1999, 11). For Sen, agency does not mean merely opening up a broader range of options from which people can choose. Rather, agency is about having effective power to remove barriers; to use the abilities one has to make use of opportunities; and to be free to participate in, deliberate about, and have a say about economic, social, and political institutions.

The sense of agency as having the power to effect positive changes in one’s own life and the lives of those around one is captured in the more recent turn in development theory and policy to the concept of empowerment. Work on this concept is reflected in the recent World Bank titles *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction: A Sourcebook* and *Measuring Empowerment: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives*. In the latter, Deepa Narayan provides the following definition: “empowerment refers broadly to the expansion of freedom of choice and action to shape one’s life. It implies control over resources and decisions” (Narayan 2005, 4). Empowerment underscores the idea that individual agents are always already situated in social contexts that all too often determine how much control they actually have over their own lives. One connection between the concepts would have us say that enhancing agency involves empowering people individually and collectively to take purposeful and effective action in contexts in which their power to do so is impacted by institutional, economic, social, and political factors. One distinction would have us say that unlike agency empowerment is a *process* of change -- from conditions of disempowerment to ones of

empowerment. Crucially, this process involves treating people as agents of change on the road to giving them greater control over and a say about resources and decisions that affect their life prospects.

Conceiving empowerment as a process suggests that agency approaches need to be contextual, relational, and responsive to changing conditions and circumstances. Where people are located, what opportunities and resources are available, what roles and functions are performed and by whom, and whether local conditions are impacted by national and global factors and actors are issues relevant to an analysis of empowerment. I shall argue that features of feminist relational theory position it to provide the kind of contextual and detailed descriptions and analyses needed for understanding what empowerment involves. But I also argue that two aspects missing in both feminist relational theory and in the current literature on empowerment need to be added to the analysis. First, facts of embodied realities and bodily needs matter to accounts of agency and empowerment. Taking agency seriously involves taking embodiment seriously and this is because empowerment is enabled through bodies -- bodies that are fed, sheltered, safe, healthy, and engaged in meaningful participation and communal activities. Because a key aspect of feminist relational theory is its call for responding in morally appropriate ways to the needs of others, this theory can only be enriched when embodiment and bodily needs are incorporated and developed. Second, because embodied realities and bodily needs are increasingly impacted and shaped by features of globalization, attention needs to be paid to relationships of power at local, national, and global levels that have the effect of disempowering bodies. The central argument of this paper is that factors of embodied realities and bodily needs as shaped and reshaped by factors of globalization matter to accounts of agency and empowerment. I begin by using relational insights to develop the argument. I then defend the argument by discussing two case studies: features of embodied realities as captured through an examination of homelessness in the U.S. and the impact of globalization on bodies as captured in a study of Mexican women affected by a family planning policy implemented in the early 1990s.

Expanding a Feminist Relational Critique of Agency

As developed by a number of feminists,¹ relational theory uses as its starting point the fact that human beings exist in relationships and do not come into the world as the independent, autonomous, and self-sufficient agents assumed by many traditional liberal theorists.² Feminists have argued that paying attention to the relationships people are in draws special attention to the workings of power and to the ways in which factors such as race, gender, disability, and so on often reduce or prevent agency. In my own work on feminist relational theory, I argue that attending to the broad network of relationships in which people are situated allows us to identify several features distinctive to a feminist relational approach. A relational approach (1) is contextual in that it allows us to attend to the details of the lives of those affected by various kinds of unequal and oppressive relationships, relationships that are in turn shaped by particular social practices and political contexts; (2) uncovers the governing norms and practices that sustain various inequalities for those who are powerless and disadvantaged; and (3) reveals the importance of the perspectives of those adversely affected by relationships of power as sources for learning about various kinds of inequalities and the structures that sustain them.³

Liberal theory's cherished notions of autonomy and agency are not relinquished in a relational approach; instead they are reinterpreted as capacities that are shaped in and through the network of complex and ever-changing relationships in which each of us is situated (Koggel 1998). Expanding the reach of relationships from the personal to those at public, national, and global levels allows us to capture the complexity of agency: lives, relationships, and conditions are affected by local, national, and global policies in ways that determine possibilities for empowering agents. On this account, agency emerges through engagement with particular others in a network of relationships shaped by social practices and political contexts, a network that can enhance but also hinder an agent's capacity to make choices and determine the course of his or her life. So far,

¹ Examples include: Samantha Brennan (1999); Sue Campbell (2002, 2003); Lorraine Code (1991, 2000); Martha Minow (1990); Jennifer Nedelsky (1989, 1993); Susan Sherwin (1998); Mackenzie and Stoljar (2000); and Christine Koggel (1998, 2003b).

² For a fuller discussion of individualism in liberal theory, consult Chapter 2 of my *Perspectives on Equality: Constructing a Relational Theory* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).

³ Features (2) and (3) can be viewed as distinguishing a feminist relational approach from other contextual approaches like virtue ethics and utilitarianism. Margaret Walker argues that what she refers to as an ethic of care (and I a feminist relational ethic) is a unified approach that challenges and is distinct from traditional accounts of morality evident in a justice approach (Walker 1989).

relational theory captures well the idea that empowerment is a process whereby agents are enabled to use abilities and resources to effect change in ways that remove or alleviate conditions of oppression.

To this call by relational theorists for an analysis of the complex network of relationships in which each of us is situated, I now want to highlight two additional features. First, assessing agency and empowerment requires accounts of embodied realities and bodily needs. In *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality*, Gail Weiss surveys literature by ethic of care theorists to argue that while many acknowledge the importance of bodies in their accounts of caring for others, they either tend to focus on non-ambiguous mother-child relationships to the exclusion of an account of the broader network of relationships that also require ethical responses to bodily imperatives or they fail to foreground the “role that the body itself plays in our moral interactions” (Weiss 1999, 136-146). Weiss argues that feminists often “subvert their own goals by failing to do justice to the particularities of the lived body, particularities which are an indispensable feature of our moral practices and which have yet to become an equally indispensable feature of our moral theorizing” (Weiss 1999, 143).

Weiss uses Simone de Beauvoir’s discussion of the network of personal relationships that changed in the course of responding to her mother dying of cancer (Weiss 1999, 146-163). I want to apply Weiss’s idea of bodily imperatives to the realm of public relationships by examining homelessness in the U.S., an issue that would seem to foreground embodied realities and bodily needs. While Weiss’s discussion of Beauvoir shows a process by which those involved gained insight into appropriate ethical responses to a particular dying body, the discussion of homelessness presents a case of a failure to respond to the bodily needs of those who are fellow citizens and strangers.

Second, the contemporary context of globalization requires an analysis of embodied realities and bodily imperatives attentive to a reality in which virtually all relationships are being shaped and reshaped by local, national, and global factors and in ways that often disempower people and hinder possibilities for agency. A brief discussion of the World Bank’s multivolume work, *Voices of the Poor* will allow me to capture why relational theory is relevant to assessing empowerment and also why it demands that we think about embodied realities in the contemporary context of globalization.

In the Forward to the first volume, the President of the World Bank describes the work as “an unprecedented effort to gather the views, experiences, and aspirations of more than 60,000 poor men and women from 60 countries” (Narayan 2000, ix). In the Introduction, the editors explain that the project was undertaken “to set a precedent for the participation of poor men and women in global policy debates” (Narayan 2000, 4). There is much to applaud in this World Bank project that makes the *voices* of the poor central to its analysis of poverty and to policies for alleviating it. The project would seem to take perspectives seriously. What is missing, however, becomes evident soon into reading the volumes.

The editors describe the study as providing “rich descriptions of poor people’s realities, drawing on their experiences of poverty and the quality of their interactions with a range of institutions, from the state to the household” (Narayan 2000, 3). They define the range of institutions as fitting two broad divisions of state and civil: “State institutions include national, regional, and local governments; the judiciary; and the police. Civil institutions include NGOs, trade unions, community-based organizations, social associations, kinship networks, and so forth” (Narayan 2000, 9). They pay attention to context when they argue that state institutions intersect with and shape civil institutions in specific ways in particular locations. They rightly avoid giving an account of people’s lives in isolation from the local and state institutions that shape them. However, what is glaringly absent is any discussion of global institutions and their intersections with and shaping of state and civil institutions in particular locations, including the World Bank itself that produced the study. Absent is recognition of the relationship between the World Bank doing the study and those being studied, a relationship of power that would seem to be relevant to the results of the study itself in terms of what is said, heard, and reported when the World Bank listens to the voices of the poor.

As described thus far, feminist relational theory has us pay attention to relationships of power and to the ways in which factors such as race, gender, disability, and so on affect and sometimes reduce or prevent agency. But taking this insight seriously also demands that we pay attention to embodied realities in the particularity of people who are unable to satisfy bodily needs or who perform functions and roles based on the bodies they have. The World Bank’s multivolume work on poverty draws attention to the importance of voice, but this raises the question of whether hearing and reporting what is heard absent an account of the lived and concrete realities of bodies and bodily

needs is sufficient for uncovering norms and taking perspective seriously. In taking into account the relevance of perspectives, but merely in terms of listening, interpreting, and recording different voices are we missing features of embodied realities and bodily imperatives that are relevant to an account of agency and empowerment? Do we run the risk of repeating the very power structures that contribute to processes of disempowerment? A discussion of the issue of homelessness in the following section and of women in Mexico in the final section highlights problems in an account of perspectives that takes listening to, interpreting, and recording voices to be sufficient. In the process, questions are raised about whose perspectives count and which bodies matter in an understanding of agency and in the formulation of policies for empowering agents.

Agency and Bodily Imperatives: Disempowering the Homeless

In “Homelessness and the Issue of Freedom,” Jeremy Waldron highlights contradictions in the U.S., where commitment to the primacy of negative freedom (or freedom from interference) is espoused at the same time as laws are being passed that restrict what the homeless can do and where. By restricting what can be done on common property such as streets, parks, and subways, these increasingly popular laws, he argues, limit where activities such as eating, sleeping, washing, and going to the bathroom can be performed by those without homes. Because these bodily functions are necessary for life itself, the homeless, Waldron provocatively states, are “allowed to *be* in our society only to the extent that our society is communist” (Waldron 1991, 433, his emphasis). In other words, they are allowed to be only when they are allowed to use public or common property to perform the necessary bodily functions of urinating and defecating and to satisfy the basic bodily needs of eating, sleeping, and washing.

Significantly, laws that bar sleeping on subways or on park benches, for example, not only restrict what can be done on common property, they also have the effect of physically removing homeless people from places where they can be seen or encountered. Waldron argues that the laws are intended to have this effect because “people do not want to be confronted with the sight of the homeless ... and they are willing to deprive these people of their last opportunity to sleep in order to protect themselves from this discomfort” (Waldron 1991, 437). It can be said, then, that these increasingly popular policies to deal with the “problem of homelessness” free those who have

property and are more powerful from being confronted with the bodily imperatives that would require them to respond at all, let alone to respond in morally appropriate ways. Being free to ignore the fact that people have needs that demand a response is to be free to believe that the responsibility for homelessness rests with others, either the state or the homeless themselves. Moreover and more generally, not encountering the homeless in common and public areas means that many people can come to believe that the problem of homelessness has been solved -- there are fewer or no homeless people to be seen so it must be that they now have homes. And if we do not need to see or interact with them, we need not know anything about them; not even that their numbers continue to rise or that they live in conditions unimaginable to those who take for granted that they can perform basic human functions and satisfy basic needs in the privacy of their own homes.⁴ They have become invisible; so much so that it takes the making of a film to make it known that they exist and in large numbers.

Dark Days documents a community of homeless people living in a train tunnel beneath Manhattan, a virtual city underneath a city. The film has us learn that for some who are interviewed this has been their home for as long as 25 years. Through the interviews we are invited to see “them” as like “us” in having relationships, dreams, goals, and hopes for the future. The story line of *Dark Days* is centered on Amtrak’s effort in the late 1990s to remove these homeless people from the train tunnel. By the end of the film those who have lived in this underground community become the beneficiaries of policies that provide them with housing -- a happy ending to the depiction of them as leading horrific lives without sunlight and surrounded by rats (Sanger 2001). This policy of providing homes fits the approach of treating people as passive recipients of aid. Waldron’s provocative paper suggests that there may be something missing or problematic both in the *Dark Days* description of these lives lived underground and in the “happy” ending that has them evicted from the tunnels and moved into homes.

Waldron attempts to make the details of homelessness vivid and visible by describing in concrete ways their lack of bodily freedom to wash, urinate, sleep, and eat. At the same time, Waldron explicitly rejects any suggestion that the lack of freedom resulting from increasingly

⁴ A *New York Times* article estimates that there are 88,000 homeless in L.A., making it the city with the highest population of homeless. Moreover, L.A. is ranked 18 out of 20 cities for being the “meanest” in treating its homeless (nytimes.com/2006/01/15/national/15homeless.html).

restrictive laws implies that the homeless lack agency: “people remain agents, with ideas and initiatives of their own, even when they are poor. Indeed, since they are on their own, in a situation of danger, without any place of safety, they must often be more resourceful . . . than the comfortable autonomous agent that we imagine in a family with a house and a job in an office or university” (Waldron 1991, 434). Waldron suggests that homeless people have agency because they need to act and be aware of the implications of those actions in ways not confronted by most: they need to know the laws and policies that affect them, they need to be resourceful in finding places where they can do what others do privately and without thought, and they need to make decisions that allow them to stay alive. Avoiding homeless shelters that turn out to be dangerous or creating communities underground are decisions born from experiences of coping with conditions dictated by laws and policies designed to “solve the problem of homelessness.”

But the agency Waldron finds is not the same as that outlined in Sen’s account, where agency is connected with having the power to shape a life one has “reason to value” (Sen 1999, 14). Even if we follow Waldron’s important insight that homeless people need to be conceived as agents, it is also important to acknowledge that they have no control over resources or over the conditions, laws, and policies that determine the choices they can make. Because the capacity for controlling one’s environment gives the concept of empowerment its force, describing these embodied realities and bodily needs is important for capturing features of disempowerment that otherwise go unnoticed.

Waldron recognizes that structures, laws, and ideology work to prevent homeless people from having the freedoms endorsed in a country that prides itself on being “the land of the free,” but his main concern in this paper is to criticize the conception of freedom as that which any and all individuals have to shape their own lives by taking advantage of the opportunities hailed as available to all. Commitment to this picture of freedom and of agency as “calling up the power from within” is evident in prevalent beliefs such as that homeless people, and poor people more generally, can change their lives and pull themselves out of the rut they are in by just getting a job -- like anyone else. There are no laws that bar them from getting a job or buying a house so the choices they make and the lives they lead are taken to be the result of their lack of effort, discipline, or willingness to change. As Waldron argues, however, it is just not clear how those who are homeless can apply for jobs without an address or phone number or how they can go to a job interview with no place to

shower or change and with all their worldly possessions in a shopping cart. Here, the language of equality of opportunity is empty because, as Waldron puts it, “one cannot pee in an opportunity” (Waldron 1991, 440). The concrete details of bodily functions and needs matter to the analysis of freedom and equal opportunity, but they are invisible to those in homes who need not think of them or be in places where they are forced to respond to them.

While *Dark Days* begins by listening to and documenting life stories, the film does not focus our attention on the relations of power that construct the norms resulting in homelessness. The film ends with clips of people who end up in homes and grateful for getting them. In other words, the film endorses the idea that private property is the solution to homelessness with no thought on how relations of power have constructed the institutions of property that disempower the homeless in the first place. By contrast, because the purpose of Waldron’s essay is to challenge liberals on the issue of whether the homeless have even negative freedom, his own remarks on policy are directed at the need to ameliorate those restrictions on common property that hamper the homeless from meeting their basic bodily needs. While Waldron may be right to suggest that acceptance of the primacy of negative freedom in the U.S. calls for, at the very least, increasing the number of public washrooms so that people are free to go to the bathroom and wash, this policy hardly seems sufficient for enhancing agency in the sense of being able to live a life one has reason to value by having a say in the policies that shape it.

I suggest that we can get better answers to questions of policy if we reject the liberal framework within which the debate is conducted and the policy options are structured: either removing laws that limit freedom for some (negative rights) or providing resources that enhance freedom for all (positive rights). New possibilities for theory and for policy emerge when we shift the focus from individuals as such to individuals in relationships needing to respond in morally appropriate ways to embodied realities and bodily needs. Doing so also allows me to pay more explicit attention than does Waldron to two features central to the relational approach: the relevance of revealing norms that are in place and the significance of a developed account of perspectives to theory and policy.

On Waldron’s account, those counted as poor display their agency in the skills and resourcefulness they need to respond to conditions beyond their control and the knowledge they

have of those conditions and the structures that perpetuate them. Although Waldron does not himself highlight this point, his account explains why it is more apparent to the homeless than to those with homes just how meaningless is the language of rights to free speech, to vote, to run for office, or to assemble when freedoms to wash, urinate, sleep, and cook are restricted. But listening, learning, and reporting these perspectives will not do all the work and this is so for reasons that point to how norms are invisible, assumed, and accepted by those who derive benefits from the system and from the structures that are already in place.

A central feature of relational theory is that a focus on relationships highlights the role of perspectives in uncovering norms that reflect dominant beliefs and expectations about what it means to live and act in circumstances very different from those with which people in power are familiar. Norms shape “outsider” perspectives to structures of power differently from “insider” perspectives on that power. A feature of the expanded relational approach I have sketched is its responsiveness to the particularities of kinds of relationships and, therefore, to various bodily needs demanded in and through them. Learning about the details of homelessness from reading or from viewing films allows one to gain some imaginative access to the kind of embodied experience that the homeless face. But this imagining and then making policies may not have the effect of empowering those who are powerless in varied ways and at multiple levels. Taking perspectives seriously involves more in that it needs to involve caring about the breakdown of relationships and the failure to respond to the bodily imperatives of others. The expanded understanding of the role of perspectives when coupled with the reality of bodily needs shifts the focus from thinking about what we can do for “them” to what we can and should do about relationships of power that many of us continue to accept, endorse, or leave unchallenged. In the case of homelessness in liberal societies, this shift opens up possibilities for questioning the relationships, or absence of them, that are set up between those with property and those without.

Confronting the material realities of homelessness allows us to become aware that the relationships we fail to confront, form, or respond to are relevant to the lack of power that some people have to effectively shape their lives as full members of a community. But there is some reason for pessimism when even those who are aware and care are prevented from responding to the bodily needs of the homeless. Laws and ordinances are now being adopted in places like Las Vegas

to limit the distribution of charitable meals in parks by “restricting the time and place of such handouts, hoping to discourage homeless people from congregating and, in the view of officials, ruining efforts to beautify downtowns and neighborhoods” (nytimes.com/2006/07/28/us/28homeless.html). A relational approach insists that we are individually and collectively accountable for the ways in which we interact or fail to interact with or respond to those whose embodied realities yield bodily imperatives which demand a moral response.

The discussion of homelessness shows how specific conceptions of property and freedom shape beliefs, expectations, and policies in the U.S. with respect to homelessness. When we move to the global context, it can be said that beliefs and expectations about the virtues of globalization dominate and in ways that reach into the lives of people all over the world. One way to connect the discussion of homelessness in the U.S with a discussion of the global context is to think about the ways in which the conceptions of property and freedom just discussed now dominate the world scene. More important for my purposes of connecting the two case studies, are the lessons to be learned about the need to link conceptions of agency and empowerment to embodied realities and bodily imperatives. As mentioned in the introduction, the World Bank highlights the importance of paying attention to the poor in its multivolume work *Voices of the Poor*. In its more recent work on empowerment, the World Bank reiterates its claim that poor people need to be the proper focus -- this time to achieve the goal of measuring gains in levels and kinds of empowerment (Narayan 2005, ix, 4-5).

In the discussion of homelessness, doubt was cast on the idea that listening, interpreting, and reporting what people say is sufficient for capturing aspects of the embodied realities of those who are identified as poor. We need to pay attention to the role of power as it manifests itself in norms and perspectives that go unnoticed because they are prevalent or globally dominant. This was evident in the discussion of homelessness where norms have the effect of removing the homeless from sight and from relations with those in or with power. In the global context, the voices of the poor can be silenced or reinterpreted when people commissioned by international bodies such as the World Bank have power over what is said and heard and when they assume dominant norms and expectations about what globalization has achieved and can achieve.⁵ The following section picks up

⁵ In *We the Peoples*, the United Nations notes that “Countries that a mere generation ago were struggling with

on the second issue I identified as missing in the literature on agency and empowerment: the contemporary context of globalization requires broadening the analysis of relationships from those at the level of the personal and local to those at the level of the public, national, and global, where relationships of power shape and reshape embodied realities and bodily needs in ways that enhance but also hinder processes of empowerment.

Agency and Empowerment in the Global Context

An overarching feature of globalization is that we live in a context of *economic* globalization, one in which markets, multinational corporations, international financial institutions, and world trade organizations shape the issues and circumscribe its effects on people. I have argued elsewhere that it is problematic to make general claims about economic globalization as either all bad or all good (Koggel 2003a, 2003b, 2006). Larger and more open markets have provided jobs for people where little opportunity existed before, jobs that have in turn increased levels of income and national wealth, improved access to education and healthcare, and challenged gender norms and practices in many parts of the world. But economic globalization has also resulted in the exploitation of workers in Third World countries and the destruction of families, ways of life, and communities when corporations move to countries with even lower wage labor or when rich countries or international financial institutions place conditions on aid or debt payments. While economic globalization may have positive effects, these sorts of negative effects have magnified the imbalances of power between rich and poor countries and in ways that shape its effects on citizens of a country and the power they have to change oppressive conditions. To assess the effects of globalization, we need detailed accounts of location, beliefs, and practices and of economic, social, and political conditions and structures. The attention to context and relationships called for by feminist relational theorists can now be used to identify specific features of economic globalization that shape material realities in ways that have the effect of disempowering agents in specific contexts.⁶

underdevelopment are now vibrant centres of *global economic activity* and domestic well-being” (United Nations 2000, 19, my emphasis). While the report admits that economic globalization has not made a significant impact on reducing levels of poverty or closing the gap between the rich and poor, it accepts that economic globalization with its commitments to free markets and neoliberal policies is here to stay and can be made to work.

⁶ My work on relational theory in the global context has benefited from Chandra Mohanty’s postcolonial feminist account of how women’s specific kind of work, whether of lace makers in a specific region of India or of electronics workers in factories in the Silicon Valley, is embedded in the local particularities of social practices and political

In “Does Contraception Benefit Women? Structure, Agency, and Well-being in Rural Mexico,” Austreberta Beutelspacher, Emma Martelo, and Verónica García apply insights from Sen’s account of agency to a discussion of the family planning program implemented by the Mexican government in the early 1990s. The slogan “fight poverty” reflected the government’s belief that encouraging women to use contraceptives to limit the number of children they had would give them the freedom to pursue educational and work opportunities and thereby make them better off (Beutelspacher, Martelo and García, 218). Rural parts of Mexico such as Chiapas were specific targets of the program because these areas “had the highest poverty levels and fertility rates in Mexico as well as the lowest contraception rates” (Beutelspacher, Martelo and García, 218). The authors compile data through interviews and questionnaires from six rural communities in Chiapas and then assess whether the government’s promise of enhancing women’s agency and improving their lives was met. Based on what women had to say about the effects of the family planning program on them, the study then divided women into four categories: “willingly home based,” “unwillingly home based,” “willingly employed,” and “unwillingly employed” (Beutelspacher, Martelo and García, 224).

The study is to be applauded for capturing the fact that context and details matter: the family planning program impacted differently on women in specific locations and circumstances and did not result in improving the lives or increasing the agency of some women. But the study stops short of providing an analysis of the broader network of relationships in which these women are embedded. For example, the study notes that some women from the “willingly home based” category were forced to undergo sterilization by health care professionals and husbands. These women were specifically targeted because their wanting to stay home and raise children did not fit with a program to fight poverty by encouraging women to work outside the home. But raising children and even having large families need not by itself be taken as signifying poverty or oppression. We need to know whether expectations about women’s proper role in the home determine women’s choices and whether women are negatively impacted by this choice in order to know whether paid work enhances agency or improves well-being.

contexts at the same time as global markets utilize and reshape local particularities. In other words, her analysis of the local is always cognizant of various forces of power at the global level that impact on women’s workplace experiences and their lives more generally (Mohanty 1997).

There is yet more to learn in the case of these women who are categorized or perceive themselves as willingly home based. Globally dominant beliefs (evident in this family planning policy) that poverty can be alleviated by increased access to jobs, education, and global markets means that women who care for children are perceived not only as non market contributors but also as unable to feed, clothe, and care for their children. Moreover, if they live on subsistence farms, what they and their families do neither counts as work nor gets counted in measuring gains to educational and work opportunities. What is invisible or ignored, in other words, are the material realities of subsistence farming as a viable means of responding to bodily needs. To assess agency or empowerment in terms of opportunities in the market is to deny that choosing to engage in subsistence farming can result in responsible ways of responding to the material conditions and bodily needs of children, families, and communities.

To get an accurate assessment of whether people are empowered, we need to know the details of subsistence farming in particular places and in the context of globalization. What are the mortality rates and life expectancies in these rural areas? Is there access to clean water? Is the choice to subsist on farms undermined or removed by a forced dependence on the purchase of seeds, pesticides, and fertilizers sold by global corporations? Are markets for farm produce affected by global agricultural policies designed to protect farmers in rich countries? Are lives improved when one time subsistence farmers are forced into urban areas? When globalization reduces possibilities for subsistence farming as a livelihood option, then it is true that access to education and work become means of empowerment. But this is so only because choices have been restricted or removed from people who once led lives they had reason to value.

Returning to other aspects of the study, whether women perceive education and jobs as opportunities depends on conditions such as whether families own and live off the land, whether there are jobs available in a particular location, whether one has already had education and how much, whether the jobs that are available are desirable, and whether one's identity and life plans are integrally connected with the important work of caring for children. In other words, whether women perceive themselves to be better off or in control of their lives by using contraception and having fewer children is dependent on a myriad of factors, some of which are shaped by local traditions, norms, and ways of life and some of which are beyond the control of women to reject or change

because they are controlled by national policies or multinational corporations.

Sen's persuasive argument that coercive policies of population control are less effective than collaborative policies would make him critical of the coercive aspects of Mexico's family planning policy. Collaborative strategies view resources such as healthcare, education, and work opportunities as important conditions for empowering women to make choices reflective of lives they have reason to value: "Central to reducing birth rates, then, is a close connection between women's well-being and their power to make their own decisions and bring about the changes in the fertility pattern" (Sen 1999, 469-485). But two points need to be made to expand the analysis beyond Sen. First, providing resources should not override decisions and ways of life that do not fit free market ideology that having a job and earning a salary inevitably enhance agency and well-being. We saw in the case of homelessness that entrenched assumptions about connections between property and freedom are contradicted by the embodied realities and bodily needs of homeless people. We also saw that giving homeless people property may increase their freedom to perform bodily functions, but it does not empower them in the sense of expanding their opportunities or enabling them to participate and have a say. Second, an assessment of national policies of population control needs an understanding of how these policies are often shaped by features of economic globalization in ways that reduce women's power or even the power of the state to make choices or shape policy for its citizens.

The significance of the latter point is highlighted through a broadened discussion of the "willingly employed" and "unwillingly employed" in the Mexico study. The basic point is that the employment opportunities a woman has may have less to do with her willingness or unwillingness to work than with government policies and the shaping of them by global institutions. Whether there is work and what kind of work there is are controlled by factors such as Mexico's economy, labor laws and regulations, free trade agreements, access to labor markets by multinational corporations, and policies tied to debt payments to lending countries and to institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank. An assessment of whether paid work is chosen or whether choosing it empowers agents needs an analysis of local conditions and opportunities in the areas under study and of how these are in turn shaped by national and global factors. An assessment of whether women's lives are positively affected by government policies and in ways that enhances agency needs an analysis of whether they

are empowered to have a say in national policies of all sorts, of family planning programs and health care more generally, of access to and conditions of paid work, of educational opportunities, and of participation in social and political structures.

While women described as willingly employed can be said to have benefited from the family planning program, this may depend less on their “choice” to work than on factors external to their lives, their communities, and even their country. Economic globalization often drives developing countries to create jobs by luring multinational corporations through policies such as removing minimum wage labor or creating tax incentives for them. This is not to say that job creation does not have positive effects, but we need an assessment of empowerment as impacted by factors such as the availability of education and health care programs, the kind and conditions of paid work, access to information about jobs and transportation to them, social norms and institutions that shape perceptions and roles of members of certain groups, and the value women place on having and caring for children. As with the discussion of homelessness, this kind of assessment provides a critical perspective on issues of listening to and reporting what is heard. In the Mexico study, women’s experiences and preferences need to be understood in terms of their material realities and this can be provided through an analysis of the broader network of local, national, and global relationships that shape those experiences and lives in complex and ever-changing ways.

Conclusion

Early in the paper, I described empowerment as a process of enabling people, individually and collectively, to take purposeful and effective action in contexts in which their power to do so is impacted by institutional, social, and political factors. Empowerment needs to be conceived as a process in which people are treated as agents of change and through which they are able to use their skills and abilities to have control over and a say about resources and decisions that affect their life prospects. But if the forces of economic globalization have such an overarching impact on lives in all corners of the world, then it is fair to say that people in many locations have little or no control over resources and decisions that affect their lives and that their embodied realities and bodily needs are being shaped from the outside by these economic forces. As argued in the case of women in Mexico, their very freedom to make significant life choices about having and raising children is

being shaped by national policies and global forces in ways that determine what they do with their bodies and where. And whether they are able to respond to the bodily needs of others is increasingly dependent on changes to markets, economic conditions, currency rates, free trade agreements, policies tied to aid and debt payment, prices dictated by powerful pharmaceutical companies, neoliberal agendas, and so on.

Globally dominant expectations that economic globalization in the form of markets, multinational corporations, and global financial institutions can and will empower people and increase their well-being, no matter what conditions or embodied realities present themselves in particular locations, can be said to be disempowering if it means that embodied realities and bodily needs are themselves shaped and reshaped by these forces. Entrenched beliefs and expectations of what it means to be homeless or what economic globalization can achieve make it difficult for those in relationships of powerlessness to be heard and these embodied realities to be visible or understood.

An examination of the new literature on empowerment shows that little or no attention is given to the features of economic globalization that can disempower individuals, communities, and nations. In these cases what gets empowered are multinational corporations, international financial institutions, world trade organizations, neoliberal policies, and market economies. To be effective, empowerment projects need an analysis of embodied realities and bodily needs as affected by complex networks of relationships now being shaped and reshaped by economic globalization. The study of women's experiences and lives under Mexico's family planning policy shows that agency in the domain of reproductive choice is not only tied up with empowering women in other domains, but also with the impact of the global on local conditions and national policies. For many of these women, their embodied and material realities were determined by factors beyond their control.

In this paper, I used insights from feminist relational theory to develop an account of agency and empowerment that pays attention to embodied realities and bodily needs in the context of how these are being shaped and reshaped in complex ways by the multi-dimensional and varied intersections of state, civil, and *global* institutions. Because economic globalization affects differently situated people in diverse ways, detailed accounts of conditions, practices, policies, embodied realities, and relationships are needed. A framework for conceptualizing and measuring

empowerment that assumes or unquestioningly promotes economic globalization may not reveal the whole story about kinds of barriers, including those that may be created by economic globalization itself. We need to pay attention to how the multi-dimensional and varied intersections of state, civil, and global institutions shape and reshape embodied realities when it increases gaps between the rich and poor, when it destroys ways of life that once sustained families and communities, when it pushes people into densely populated urban centers where basic material needs are not being met, when it exploits embodied realities of race, ethnicity, gender, and disability to increase profits, and when it exacerbates relations of power with and in countries that have colonial and imperial histories. To move from treating people as passive victims of development policies to treating them as agents empowered to have control over their lives demands awareness of the processes of economic globalization that shape embodied realities and create bodily needs in ways that undermine agency and empowerment.

References

- Beutelspacher, Austreberta Nazar, Martelo, Emma Zapata, and García, Verónica Vázquez. "Does Contraception Benefit Women? Structure, Agency, and Well-Being in Rural Mexico." *Feminist Economics Special Issue on the Ideas and Work of Amartya Sen*. Volume 9 no 2 (2003): 213-238.
- Brennan, Samantha. 1999. "Recent Work in Feminist Ethics," *Ethics* 109 (1999): 858-893.
- Campbell, Sue. 2002. "Dependence in Client-Therapist Relationships: A Relational Reading of O'Connor and Mills," in *Personal Relationships of Dependence and Interdependence in Law*, ed. Law Commission of Canada. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- . 2003. *Relational Remembering: Rethinking the Memory Wars*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Code, Lorraine. 2000. "How to Think Globally: Stretching the Limits of Imagination," in Uma Narayan and Sandra Harding (eds.) *Decentering the Center: Philosophy for a Multicultural, Postcolonial, and Feminist World*, pp. 67-79. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- . 1991. *What Can She Know: Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Koggel, Christine M. 2006. "Equality Analysis: Local and Global Relations of Power". In *Moral Issues in Global Perspective* edited by Christine Koggel. 2nd edition. Volume II *Human Diversity and Equality*. Peterborough: Broadview Press, pp. 376-388.
- . 2003a. "Globalization and Women's Paid Work: Expanding Freedom?" *Feminist Economics, Special Issue on the Ideas and Work of Amartya Sen*. Volume 9, no 2.
- . 2003b. "Equality Analysis in a Global Context: A Relational Approach." *Feminist Moral*

- Philosophy*, edited by Samantha Brennan. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*. Supplementary Volume, no. 28.
- . 1998. *Perspectives on Equality: Constructing a Relational Theory*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Mackenzie, Catriona and Natalie Stoljar (eds.) 2000. *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Minow, Martha. (1990). *Making all the Difference: Inclusion, Exclusion and American Law*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Mohanty, Chandra. 1997. "Women Workers and Capitalist Scripts: Ideologies of Domination, Common Interests, and the Politics of Solidarity." In *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, ed. M. J. Alexander and C. Mohanty, pp. 3-29. New York: Routledge.
- Narayan, Deepa. 2005. *Measuring Empowerment: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- . 2004. *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction: A Sourcebook*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- . 2002. *Voices of the Poor: From Many Lands*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- . 2001. *Voices of the Poor: Crying Out for Change*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- . 2000. *Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us?* Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Nedelsky, Jennifer. 1993. "Reconceiving Rights as Relationship," *Review of Constitutional Studies/Revue d'études constitutionnelles*, vol. 1, no. 1: 1-26.
- . 1989. "Reconceiving Autonomy: Sources, Thoughts, and Possibilities," *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 1: 7-36.
- Sanger, Marc (producer and director). 2001. *Dark days [DVD]*. New York, NY : [Distributed by] Palm Pictures.
- Sen, Amartya. 1999. *Development as Freedom*. New York: Anchor Books.
- . 1999. "Population: Delusion and Reality." In *Moral Issues in Global Perspective*, edited by Christine M. Koggel. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press: 469-485.
- Sherwin, Susan. 1998. "A Relational Approach to Autonomy in Health Care," in *The Politics of Women's Health: Exploring Agency and Autonomy*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press: 19-47.
- United Nations. 2000. *We the Peoples: The Role of the United Nations in the 21st Century*. New York: Department of Public Information.
- Waldron, Jeremy. 1991. "Homelessness and the Issue of Freedom." Reprinted in *Moral Issues in Global Perspective* edited by Christine M. Koggel. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1999.
- Walker, Margaret. 1989. "What Does the Different Voice Say?: Gilligan's Women and Moral Philosophy," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 23: 123-143.
- Weiss, Gail. 1999. *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality*. New York: Routledge.