Misinterpreting women’s empowerment?: How a feminist postcolonial lens can reveal new dimensions of change in women’s lives

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Women’s empowerment

• Starting place: Women are oppressed by men, tradition/culture, religion. They are victims, traditional, overworked, uneducated and passive.

• Mechanism: Participation, earning income, gaining skills or education, reducing work, improving services or institutions

• Goal: Increased agency, autonomy, income, decision making power, leadership, confidence

• Measurement: Surveys or focus groups measuring the above, counting women
The rural water project

• Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC)
• 600 handpumps
• Participatory and demand driven approach
• Community management
Women’s empowerment in the RWP

• Starting place: Inferior social positions, oppressed by religion and tradition, oppressed by water collection, lacking decision making and management of water

• Mechanism: Water committee participation and time savings

• Goals: Economic and political roles, income generating activities, modern behaviors

• Measurement: Counting number of women participating, monetizing time savings
Gender dynamics in Nampula, Mozambique

• Matrilineal
• Women are the primary water collectors, but men help
• Gender roles are complementary, the division of labor is flexible
• Marital relations marked by respect and support
• Women control the traditional water sources
• Intersectional differences
Outcomes

- Women lose control and social space at the water point
- Only a minority of people use the handpump
- Women on the water committee do more work without pay
- More time to spend with family, resting, and doing domestic work
- Increased pride, beauty, cleanliness, self-esteem
- Ability to perform the activities expected from a Makhuwa wife and mother
Feminist post-colonial lens

- Interrogate our frameworks, and look for assumptions, values, and blind-spots
- Recognize and build from women’s existing knowledge, resources, and authority
- Emotions and subjectivities
- Marital relations and motherhood
- Respect women’s decisions and priorities
• Ambivalence, contradictions and trade-offs
• Negotiation of dualist categories: modernity vs. tradition and empowered vs. oppressed
• Uneven outcomes and intersectionality
Thank you

• Questions?