

## TRAINING FOR EMPOWERMENT IN TURKISH WOMEN'S NGOs: PROCESSES AND IMPACT

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This article attempts to study the concept of empowerment in the Turkish context based on the case studies of women's organisations implementing empowerment training programs. The study brings together the evaluations of the participants, co-ordinators and trainers on the impact of these programs in order to show how the feeling of power and personal change manifests itself in private and public life experiences of women and the complexity of the processes of empowerment. The role of the organisation and the trainer are handled as the two critical factors affecting the results of these programs. In the concluding section, various issues influencing the impact of these programs are brought to attention such as the role of the social and political culture, lack of well-defined criteria for evaluation as well as further expectations from empowerment training.

### I. Introduction: Main Problematic and the Methodology of the Study

*I think now I have the power to fight with injustice. And my family cannot oppress me as before. They are aware that I'm not alone, I have friends and an organisation behind me...*

These are the words of Zeliha<sup>1</sup> from KA-MER, the Women's Centre in Diyarbakır which is established mainly to support women confronted with domestic violence. She is 37 years old and has gone through hard days of abuse and mistreat in her husband's family by him and his relatives. She was left alone with her children when the husband deserted her and had to face various kinds of oppression in her own parents' house where she sought refuge. Wedded by her husband only through a religious ceremony without an official marriage contract, she could not demand anything when the husband

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<sup>1</sup> The names of women are not their real names.

wanted to take a new wife and she was not even allowed to see her own children by her parents-in-laws. She was feeling totally downtrodden and lost when a friend brought her over to KA-MER. After a while, KA-MER became the most important turning point in Zeliha's life.

Sitting at the porch of KA-MER's restaurant, where Zeliha works currently, I had a long interview with her trying to understand how she was feeling now, what helped her to build up trust in herself and gave her back the strength and desire to live. Was this what we'd call empowerment in the personal sense and how was it made possible?

My involvement with the Turkish women's NGOs since the middle of 1970s and the experience I had in preparing and implementing various training programs for NGOs during the last few years have led me to think more and more on the concept of empowerment and on the local reflections of this concept which gained an international popularity especially after the International Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.

This article will give a short overview of the history of the concept and attempt to analyse it in the Turkish context based on a small exploratory study in which I have looked into the training projects in three different organisations (two in Ankara and one in Diyarbakır) by using qualitative research techniques. Personal observations in the organisations, focus group discussions with women who have participated in various training programs, depth-interviews with the co-ordinators of the projects as well as several participant women were accomplished mainly during February- May 2001. Also, information on similar training programs was collected through reviewing the reports and other types of documents of organisations as well as through personal interviews with several trainers.

## **II. Empowerment as Concept: One Word, Many Interpretations**

Jo Rowlands was right when she, in 1998, gave the title to her article on empowerment, *"A Word of the Times, but What Does it Mean?....."* (J. Rowlands, 1998: 20). Empowerment has been one of the most frequently used words in the international conferences of women in 1990s and in the development discourse since 1980s. It has been used by supporters of

women's rights (feminist or not feminist) and by people with different ideologies in countries at different levels of development. Each had somewhat different emphasis regarding its content, procedures and consequences.

Although one can meet the early use of the term in American Black radicalism in 1960s, the word gained its popularity when it was identified by the feminist grassroots organisations who were criticising the WID approaches of development. It is the grassroots women and their organisations (women especially from South Asian countries) who have contributed highly to the development of the concept. The original WID approach of equity during 1975-1985 which dominated the women and development literature since 1970s, was aiming political and economic autonomy of women by reducing their inequality with men mainly through top-down state interventions. In the empowerment approach which rose out of the failure of equity approach, subordination of women is perceived not only in relation to men, but also as a result of colonial and neo-colonial oppression. Instead of top-down, bottom-up processes in training are emphasised ; women's self-reliance and the mobilisation of women's organisations to attain strategic changes regarding gender roles is considered more important (Moser, 1994: 56-57). The strategic changes would make men and women equal in the control of the production factors and in the benefits of development as was emphasised by Longwe in 1989 (Osirim, 2001: 167).

#### **A. Forms of Power**

Even though the concept was used with a different emphasis by different organisations, the critical issue for the feminists has been the form or meaning of 'power' in the word empowerment.

The development perspective WID has mainly an instrumentalist, 'power over' view. It asserts that through certain programs or support systems women can be empowered to participate more in economic and political institutions of the society and will therefore occupy positions of power. On the other hand, the feminist model of power is inspired more by the thinking of Foucault who had considered power as something that is complex, relational and existing only in exercise in a network of relations.

(Foucault, 1988:101-107). This approach to power makes it possible for us to understand the oppressive forms of power in different spheres of society as well as the forms of power developed to strive against these. Feminists have expanded this understanding with a gender analysis of power relations that also includes "*an understanding of how internalised oppression places internal barriers to women's exercise of power*"(Rowlands, 1998:12).

### **B. Power Within: A Key Concept in Empowerment**

'Power within' is the strength which resides within all women, but it is hidden or rather inhibited through socially structured and culturally patterned behaviour. One should take into account women's oppression in different situations and levels such as class, ethnic groups, religion and international economic order. Women are subordinated differently according to their position in social life and it is important to go beyond formal equality with men in order to bring a radical change in women's lives. According to Kabeer,

*the multidimensional nature of power suggests that the empowerment strategies for women must build on 'the power within' as a necessary adjunct to improving their ability to control over resources, to determine agendas and make decisions* (Kabeer, 1994: 229).

### **C. Appropriate Approaches and Strategies for Empowerment**

Programs of empowerment defined not only the goals, but also the means, the strategies of reaching these goals differently. Bottom-up approaches, needs assessment, interactive adult education techniques, experiments, peer visits, learning from one another and trainers who are not lecturers, but facilitators ready to learn from the experiences of the participants gained importance. International experiences such as the Grameen Bank and SEWA reflected that through participatory approaches, it is possible to change the initial set of needs for other, more hidden needs during the process of training. How women were approached by the organisations became especially important. Did they see them only as '*passive clients in need of enlightenment and uplifting or as real actors who can make their own decisions*' (Kabeer, 1994: 235)? Being considered 'real

actors' helped women to build up trust in themselves and feel more responsible.

Feminist epistemology and Paul Freire's method of learning and problem solving have both contributed to the empowerment training programs in terms of setting the training situation in such a way that both the trainers and the participants are teachers and students at the same time (Mies, 1995: 55; Stanley and Wise, 1995: 67-98; Collins, 1995: 04; Freire, 1991). In the feminist method of reaching knowledge and in Freire's method of learning, the training situation is participatory; the trainer and the participants are informing one another and sharing their experiences. The participants may be a subordinated, disadvantaged or oppressed group (which is usually the case), but this doesn't put them into a lower level and make them 'passive clients' who must be taught and directed. They have valuable experiences and the trainer usually builds the training program upon these.

Empowerment strategies also stress the recognition of the shared aspects of subordination and aim that women see by themselves what they experience is nothing totally personal. Since the problem concerns a larger group, it can also be intervened through collective action. Therefore, understanding other people, getting together with them in solidarity, forming alliances becomes important. This is what is understood as the "power with". The ultimate goal at this point is what is called the "power to", which means women acting together for a change in their practical and strategic interests (Kabeer, 1994: 253-256).

The experiences of the grassroots organisations especially in the Third World countries have reflected that women need to fulfil some of their practical needs before they can bring themselves to a position where they can formulate their strategic needs and change their subordinating position in relation to men. So the practical and strategic needs can be regarded as different aspects of the same problem (Kabeer, 2000:32). However, after the practical needs are met, it cannot be taken for granted that women automatically have the power to question their status and attempt to make strategic changes. The power required for this struggle also needs to be built up through the processes of empowerment where women rethink about themselves, find connections between their situation and those of other women, and in the long run transfer '*power within*' to '*power to*'.

### III. Empowerment in Discourse and Practice in Turkey

In Turkey, the word empowerment has started to be used initially in projects aiming income-generating activities for women. In 1990s, international donors started to include gender criteria in the evaluation of the rural development projects of NGOs working in this area (Interview with S.Demir from Turkish Development Foundation). It was considered important to bring women to a position where they could participate actively in the decision-making mechanisms and also benefit from the results of the development processes. In order to accomplish this, various training programs for empowering women had to be integrated into the projects.

The concept of empowerment started to become more popular after the 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Women in 1995 since the conference documents had declared the empowerment of women and gender equality as prerequisites for achieving political, social, economic, cultural and environmental security of all people. "Empowering women" especially in the critical areas designated in the action platform of this conference was accepted, at least in discourse of different women's organisations. Most of the time without awareness of the theoretical debates and the historical realities which have contributed to the development of this concept, it was employed usually with a *broad understanding* which simply meant supporting women economically or socially through different measures with the aim of increasing their status in social, political and economic life.

Toward the end of 1990s, in several projects initiated by feminist women, training for empowerment started to be discussed not only with respect to what was being aimed, but also how it was going to be achieved. Participatory approaches and making women aware of their potentials became the critical issues in these discussions.

#### A. Historical Experience in Educating/ Training Women

Training for empowerment is a new concept, but training has always been an important issue in women's organisations as well as other civil society organisations in Turkey.

In general, starting with the early Republican period, training and educating people to become better citizens or supporting them by providing for their practical needs has been the aim of associations that existed. These programs which were traditionally under the effect of state ideology were usually carried out as top-down activities of politically engaged cadres.

Training in the sense of supporting women to raise their status, educating them to be good wives, mothers and citizens has been an old concern of women's organisations in Turkey (N. Sirman, 1989). Especially for the young women of the Republic in 1930s and for those women who grew up with the ideology of Atatürk's reforms, educating other women to be literate and enlightened mothers as well as good citizens aware of their legal rights in the new Turkish Republic was considered very important. In both public and private life women were expected to play a role which would serve the modernisation efforts of the new nation within the principles defined by Kemalism (Kandiyoti, 1997 and 1998; Arat Y., 1998). The training programs for educating other women were also planned within this context.

During the 1960s and 1970s with the establishment of mass democratic organisations of students and workers under the effect of various leftist ideologies, some of the young women, especially those who were high school and university students in those years also found themselves in different Marxist circles. Women's associations organised by these circles were primarily anti-state and attempted the political mobilisation of the middle or lower middle classes of women against the existing political and economic system. In order to mobilise the masses of women these organisations also carried out training activities. Being highly politicised, the *focus* on women's question from a feminist perspective and gender-based subordination by men was a missing subject in these training programs. The topics were usually related with various practical issues in women's lives, the basic economic and political problems in the country as well as the need for democratic organisations. There were amateur trials in using interactive techniques of education; the training sessions usually took place in the areas where women live, sometimes in their homes to increase the participation; informal networks of women were used to reach women and the programs were successful in politicising the women for massive actions and campaigns ( Arikan, S. et al, 1996).

After the middle of 1980s there has been some change in the number, type and forms of civil society organisations (as well as women's organisations). The economic, political and social changes in Turkey within the context of developing global relations has opened the space for a variety of civil society organisations on specific issues. Most of these new NGOs were supported by external or local private funds; they were not interested in mass membership and tried to distance themselves from the state.

Women's organisations increased also not only in number, but they were set-up in new forms for new functions; they were not only charity-based, volunteer organisations, but were oriented to specific services on different issues; they started to employ professional staff and learned to raise especially external funds for individual projects (Kardam N. and Ertürk Y., 1999). Based on their strategies and activities, these organisations were classified by Eşim and Cindoğlu into different categories such as emancipation and equity, welfare and empowerment. According to their analysis the development strategies followed also had reflections in the training programs of organisations ( Eşim S. and Cindoğlu D., 1999).

### **B. Experience With Training Programs in 1990s**

At the beginning of 2000, a few of the graduate programs or centres on women's issues in the universities<sup>2</sup>, various women's organisations and projects and the Directorate General on the Status and Problems of Women<sup>3</sup> had already accumulated some knowledge and experience related especially with gender and women's human rights training. These experiences were shared with other women's organisations which carry on training activities at a workshop organised by KASAUM (Women's Centre at Ankara University).

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<sup>2</sup> The institutionalisation of women's studies started in early 1990's in Turkey. In the year 2000, the number of women' programs and research centres in universities had reached 13. (Zeliha Unaldi in Flying News Women's Communication Bulletin, Special Issue in English, March 2000)

<sup>3</sup> The Directorate General on the Status and Problems of Women (KSSGM) was established in 1990 in conformity with the liabilities of the Turkish Republic through international resolutions and the targets of the 6<sup>th</sup> 5-Year Development Plan. It became an affiliated body of the Ministry of State responsible from Women's Affairs, Family and Social Services in 1991. Although it had a limited budget and human resources, it could achieve considerable gains in terms of research and data accumulation related with women's issues and gender equality policies. It also acts as a co-ordinating body among government institutions on women's issues. (Selma Acuner in Flying News Women's Communication Bulletin, Special Issue in English, March 2000).



The workshop revealed that the training programs varied in content and implementation according to the general perspectives and goals of the organisations and their expectancies from the training program. Training programs were mainly directed to women from lower or lower middle socio-economic classes. The topics of training included gender roles, domestic violence, reproductive rights, legal rights, women's health problems, participation in political life, communication, organising and planning activities, lobbying, feminism, women's movement and solidarity, children's rights, developing personal identity and assertiveness, establishing and managing small business (KASAUM, 2000).

In most of the training programs, there was an attempt to make use of some of the participatory adult training techniques such as learning by experience, visiting, sightseeing, learning from peers, discussions and role-playing. In a few projects planned and co-ordinated by feminist women, training of trainers programs also included sessions on feminist epistemology (Interview with Aksu Bora from KASAUM).

#### **IV. Empowerment Training in Women's NGOs: The Case Studies**

In order to have a deeper insight into the processes of empowerment training I will give some details regarding the implementation of the programs and the evaluations of the participants and co-ordinators in two of the organisations I have observed.

##### **A. Çağdaş Kadın ve Gençlik Vakfı (Contemporary Women and Youth Foundation)**

The organisation was established at the end of 1994 by a group of women aiming to contribute to the enhancement of the conditions of women and youth in the socio-economically lower living quarters of Ankara. Their program included mainly literacy courses, courses for support of secondary education, vocational courses and a variety of cultural activities.

The aims and structure of the organisation bears many similarities with the traditional service-oriented organisations aiming to answer the practical needs of women. However, with the volunteer work of one of its

founders, who had the background and long years of experience in social work as well as close relations with women's associations, the activities were carried out with a perspective of getting the people of that area involved at every stage. Even before the organisation was formally established, she started the work in the region, making home visits to women, learning their needs and trying to understand which activities could be well accepted. Two small projects including training started with her initiation.

One of these projects, "*The Training of Women for Participation in Decision-Making Processes*" was supported financially by The Directorate General on the Status and Problems of Women. It was a 4- month project of getting women trained in their rights which included both theory and practice. The participants were informed on their rights as well as visiting certain institutions, the court and the advocacy centres. They also made visits to women's organisations in Diyarbakır, Gaziantep and Kocaeli to share experiences with them. For most of these women to go out of Ankara without their families was a totally new experience, in fact an *adventure* by itself. Among the 31 participants of the project, ten women took place in the visits to other cities. After the training sessions which were mostly conducted at the centre of the foundation, the women collected their experiences in a book titled "*My Knees Were Shaking*" in their original handwriting. Some of these women had learned how to read and write in the courses offered by the organisation.

The second project was the "*Human Rights Training Project*" which was again a similar short-time project which included a program with information sharing sessions, films, visits to human rights organisations in Ankara, Istanbul and Izmir as well as sightseeing tours and cultural events. The experiences of this training program was again collected in a book with women's original handwriting. The book included also incidences from women's own lives under the titles of "The father's house" and "The husband's house" where they tried to evaluate the situation in terms of their individual rights before and after they got married.

Most of the women in these projects were from economically lower or lower-middle class families in that neighbourhood. The ages varied between 18-54 and majority of women were elementary school graduates. They had been participating in the activities of the organisation for several years.

## A1. Implementation of the Programs

The most important aspect of the implementation in these programs was the participatory focus. The project was developed by the co-ordinator herself initially, but she discussed the project design with women; the details were discussed together and the daily activity plans were made with the participants. Some of the participants also took place in the preparatory activities such as arranging the time for the sessions, making appointments with the other NGOs etc. From the beginning, the women felt that it was *their project*.

Learning by peer group experience through visits to other organisations of women was also a strong part of the program. While relating about the visit to the Women's Advisory Centre of the Ankara Bar, the co-ordinator noted that the women were so surprised to meet a group of sympathetic woman lawyers in a small cosy room in the huge, gloomy and serious-looking courthouse where they felt themselves lost! But now, they felt that it would be easier for them to go there for advocacy. Also by making visits to the governor of the city and the municipal leaders, they experienced to articulate in front of the authorities, express their problems and state their demands in proper ways.

Different people, experts, women from women's movement, community leaders came to give them information on different issues. Most of the time these people were not trained specifically in adult education techniques or had experience in empowerment training. However, it was the participants who planned to make the situation as informal as possible so that they could forward questions and discuss. Sometimes they were also offering tea and home-baked cookies and cakes. This was an arrangement they were used to do also in other information sessions which they called 'yemece-içmece-konuşmaca' (eating-drinking and talking).

Another important factor in the implementation of this program was the approach toward participant women. In this sense the role played by the co-ordinator was important since she took place in every activity. The participants knew her well, respected her and were aware that she was experienced. She was treating them as equal partners, listening to their needs and wishes. There was no imposition to participate in the activities;

women took place in them on volunteer basis. A woman participating in the activities of the foundation explained the approach toward them as follows:

*If they were considering us as inferior, disadvantaged people to be given help, I would never go there. Even the inclusion of the word 'contemporary' in the name of the foundation reflects how they look at us here.*

## **A2. Meaning of Empowerment in Discourse and Practice**

For the co-ordinator the most significant result of these training programs is that most of the women feel themselves more valuable now. She has tried to explain this by saying:

*Their children consider them differently; they think their mother is more informed now. Also their worth is higher in front of their neighbours. Their husbands, even those who were somewhat resistant at the beginning, accept that their wives go to the Foundation Centre on certain days. They themselves say to others that Fridays are the "community centre day" for their wives. And the women are proud to see that their families accept this.*

The self confidence they started to feel in themselves after the training program was also emphasised by participant women. One woman expressed this by saying:

*I feel it even when I walk on the street that I'm different and stronger now.*

According to women, this feeling of power was the result of "learning more about themselves and their bodies", "learning to share, friendship and solidarity", "learning that there are many other women like themselves, with the same problems", "learning that they can overcome these problems", "learning their rights and how to use them"...

This was a strength which was built up by learning and doing new things. A women who had also contributed to the project books with her poetry stated with excitement:

*I have felt the pleasure of writing, I wrote poetry; I sang and acted in our theatre group. Shortly, I have done things which I had no opportunity to do before.*

What they felt as personal trust in themselves was not only a feeling, but it had some concrete reflections in their lives which they could describe. One of these was the change in their relations with family members in their daily life practices.

*I have the courage to say no to certain things that my husband and children want now and spare some time only for myself. I can convince them now that this is important for me.*

This was a statement made by one of the participant women while another one expressed that she had more tolerance now for her family; she was not as stressful and impatient as before.

Self-reliance was not only something which would make them more confident in their relations in the private sphere, but would also reflect in public life. They found the courage to express themselves better in front of strangers, even those in positions of authority and learned not be embarrassed to take the word or ask questions in larger groups.

The personal confidence was carried even further by certain women, as it was in the case of Emine, a woman in her late thirties who has gone through many courses including literacy in the organisation and she is now responsible from the daily activities of one of the centres of the foundation. She has expressed with confidence:

*I wanted to become a leader, because I was aware that in this organisation they were listening to what we were saying. I manage this centre now, but this is not sufficient for me. I know that I can carry the responsibility of higher positions. I feel that I can work more now with a higher tempo and can plan better.*

## **B. KA- MER (Women's Centre) in Diyarbakir**

The centre was established in Diyarbakır, in Southeastern Turkey in 1997 as an organisation to support women who are confronted with domestic violence as well as trying to raise consciousness around women's issues and inform women about their rights. The founders were a group of local women who believed in the autonomy of women's movement and approached the women's problems from a feminist perspective. As a result of the tense political situation of the area since the middle of 1980's, these women had to

work under unfavourable conditions. KA-MER met with resistance and pressure from many sides as an autonomous women's organisation, in fact the first such organisation in the area which was aiming to handle the issues of women and family, subjects of taboo in the traditional culture.

In spite of these negative factors, KA-MER succeeded to organise small consciousness-raising groups and established an emergency relief line for helping women suffering domestic violence in 1997. Besides providing counselling and various forms of support to these women, the centre tried to bring together women in different social and cultural activities. In 1998, KA-MER also managed to establish a child-care centre and a restaurant serving local food at its new premises. With these two enterprises, KA-MER aimed to give services to women in its immediate circle, provide employment for women, especially for those who had to leave their homes due to various kinds of mistreatment and violence. However, it was also planned that a well managed restaurant could in the long run be important for the sustainability of the other services and activities.

### **B1. Implementation of Group Discussions**

Consciousness-raising for women's human rights in small groups and group discussions with women on different issues were consistently organised by the founders of KA-MER even before it was formally established. Since 1996, about 600 women in total have participated in these groups. 12 women from the organisation have prepared themselves to be the facilitators in these training sessions, preparing their own material by informing themselves on different issues in various ways and bringing in experts to the groups as informants when necessary.

Until now they have compiled documents of training on 14 different topics (KA-MER'in Hikayesi, unpublished brochure presenting the organisation).

The training groups usually consist of 10-12 people depending on the topic or topics of discussion. The program of training is usually made after an initial stage where the needs of the participant women are assessed. The content of the training sessions include women's human rights, domestic and other forms of violence, sexuality, communication, economic rights, gender roles, education of girls, feminism and women's organisations. Each training

group comes together in 10-14 different sessions which are arranged usually once a week and each individual session lasts about 3-4 hours. At the end of the training period, the participants are asked to evaluate the training and its contribution to them.

It was planned that all the women working in KA-MER, no matter what they were doing, were to participate in these group training sessions in which women learned from one another and developed empathy for the problems of one another instead of being formally taught by someone well-versed in the subject. However, the facilitators in the sessions are women from the region, who have a feminist approach and they are aware of the importance of gender discrimination besides other forms of subordination. The fact that they can talk Kurdish is an advantage especially when they are working with women who can only express themselves (or express themselves better) in Kurdish.

The co-ordinators of the training programs at KA-MER consider that the empowerment of women begins when they become aware of themselves as individuals and start to act as individual citizens informed on their rights. Therefore, they do not *only inform* women about their rights, but *also* aim to *support* them in various ways in their efforts to change their lives. At times this may mean providing them the opportunities to meet their practical needs (literacy, employment etc.)

## **B2. Impact of Training on the Participants**

According to the evaluations based on the forms filled after the training sessions, women participating in the training sessions have not only developed consciousness on the different types of violence on women, but they have gained the courage to struggle against it. They are slowly starting to question the traditions and norms which have defined their roles in the family and society. To have a job and to have an independent income becomes a real yearning and they start to be more aware of its emancipating role.

Zeliha, the woman I have introduced at the beginning of this paper is employed on regular basis in the restaurant of KA-MER. She has described the change in herself since she came to KA-MER as change in the way she

dressed, in her outside looks, in her speech and in her increased participation in social life. She explained this process in her own words as:

*I am a different person now. I find in myself the power not to stay at home (meaning that she definitely wants to work) and also the power to struggle with injustice. From now on wherever I go, whatever I do, I will never be the former Zeliha...*

Zeliha's thoughts and plans on the possibility of a prospective marriage were also reflecting her decisiveness for self-control over her future. She has stated:

*Of course I'm not against a new marriage, but I want to state my rules from the beginning. First of all I want to work; secondly, I'm against any form of abuse and torture at home. Whatever we do at home, we must share the work, I don't want to be oppressed again. If he accepts these, then we can get together, if not he should better go on his way...*

The training, support and solidarity given to women like Zeliha at KA-MER opened a window for them to a different world. For this reason, they developed trust in the organisation and were grateful to it. This is of course understandable. However, I had the feeling that the women needed 'to get their wings repaired' very strongly before they were left to fly away from this window... They needed to have their practical needs fulfilled. Some of them like Zeliha were illiterate, with no skills and no individual resources to rely upon. In addition they suffered under various kinds of social pressure from family and relatives. Such women accept the person whom they had the closest contact in KA-MER as their saviour; they usually expect a lot from her. The danger lies in the fact that in time they may become totally dependent on this person or the organisation she represents. This dependence on the organisation may become a barrier for further emancipation and individual development.

## **V. Factors Affecting the Impact of the Training Programs**

Organisations implementing various training programs to empower women differ according to their underlying political agenda, their formal structures and methods of operation to support women. Some of the training programs may not have an *explicit* empowerment approach.



Although all these factors influence the impact of training in various ways, the overall affect of such programs (in spite of the weaknesses they may have in terms of content and the methods of implementation) are felt by the participants in some form of personal change. Women, whom I have observed in various cases have expressed in their own words how their self-reliance increased and how their communication with the family members as well as with people outside improved. The personal power, also reflected itself in readiness to defend their individual rights and to have 'niches' in their lives totally for themselves, which until then has been dominated -and without any questioning- by husbands, children and family...

When I held person-to person or e-mail interviews with the coordinators or trainers of other training projects<sup>4</sup> or reviewed the unpublished reports on the training programs (such as in WALD, KA.DER and the Women's Human Rights Project), I could see that on a broad basis the experiences were quite similar.

Although the situation of each women should be considered in its individual uniqueness, usually passing through a training program doesn't mean that the empowerment in the personal sense will automatically reflect in women's ability to come together with other women in some type of collective action. This is a level which may still demand a different context and there is no recipe for the transfer of power from personal to collective. For some women, the power gained may make them stronger and more confident of themselves in their close relations, but it doesn't go further. For others it makes it easier for them to organise and indulge into some type of collective action. For some, the personal power is there but it waits for a little spark to get going and that little spark can also be provided by the supporting organisation or the trainer.

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<sup>4</sup> In *Degirmendere Centre for the Support of Women* which is an income-generating project initiated after the earthquake in Marmara Region in 1999 by WALD/World Academy for Local Government and Democracy Foundation, empowerment training has been used to encourage women to start a women's initiative.

*KA-DER*, the women's organization aiming to increase the proportion of women in national and local government, has implemented a training program for trainers in 2001 to increase women's self-confidence and skills for more political participation.

On the other hand, *Women's Human Rights Project*, has been organising a legal literacy program in collaboration with the Agency of Social Services and Child Protection (a public agency) since 1998. They have trained trainers on different issues of women's human rights. The trainers are mainly social workers employed by the state in various social service institutions on national basis to work with local women and empower them according to their needs.

In the overall success of the empowerment training programs the organisation itself and the co-ordinators and trainers play a critical role. During this study, I have made observations on the points below which can be considered important in terms of increasing women's gains from these programs.

### **A. Position and Meaning of the Training Program for the Organisation**

The training programs can be categorised broadly into three groups in terms of the relation of the training program with the aims of the organisation:

- Programs can be planned by one of the responsible persons in the organisation as an individual project. In that case, although the program can find itself a place within the general aims of the organisation, long-term benefit from the results of the program is not planned. In general, the training projects I have studied in Contemporary Women and Youth Foundation can be classified as such.
- Programs planned either to train the members of the organisation and/or other women who are in need of training on different issues as an integral part of the overall aims of the organisation. In that case, the training sessions become one of the regular activities of the organisation. The group discussions at KA-MER can be considered under this group.
- There are also training programs planned for women's groups with different needs or for those at the initial stages of organising. The organisation or the group responsible from the training program may be acting as the supporting agent.

It seems to make a difference for participant women if the project is initiated with a clearly defined need from women themselves. Within all of the above defined categories, it is possible to design the training program by considering the needs of women and in fact have them participate in the preparatory phases of the program. However, if the organisation has clearly defined aims from the start for planning such programs (such as initiating an

income-generating project, establishing an advocacy centre, solving some of the internal conflicts of the organisation or empowering the activists), then the results of training can also be assessed substantially with respect to these specific targets.

In the first case mentioned above when the training is not planned by the organisation's leadership as part of its total program, but exist as a short-time project initiated by a few individuals in the organisation, then the possibility of the organisation to benefit from the results of the training program is limited. Also, in many organisations, especially those established in the form of foundations or associations with traditional, formal, hierarchical structures, the decision-making processes usually leave little room for the participation of others, especially those from grassroots. Although the executive boards may be satisfied with the fact that these training projects increase the interests of women in the organisation, as well as being a way to channel small funds from donor organisations, they may not be deeply concerned with their "empowering" role on women or interested to plan these as regular part of their programs. Therefore, it may depend totally on the co-ordinator of such projects (and other interested members) in that organisation to find new outlets for women who have participated in these programs, try to assign positions or roles to some of them in the organisation, channel them to other organisations or design new projects etc... All this may become an extra burden on her especially in case of little support from the organisation's leadership.

In the cases where the structure of the organisation allows space for the participation of new people in the decision-making processes, then it becomes easier for women to find new roles and functions for themselves in the organisation. Even if the formal legal structure of the organisation is not perfectly suitable for this, a different understanding at the level of its leadership can open space for more participatory decision-making processes.

### **B. The Role of the Change Agent**

The role and the approach of the co-ordinator or the trainers in projects prompting women to change (who were called 'change agents' by Rowlands (Rowlands 1998, 26) has always been considered important in empowerment programs. It is clear that the program will be more

empowering when the 'change agent' has established good dialogue with participant women; that she is someone who understands them, who is encouraging them in the right way without dictating. In this sense, benefiting from the methods of feminist epistemology or Freire's pedagogy for the oppressed will definitely help the trainers to build up the training sessions on the strengths of women.

However, even when the trainers are not making use of these methods consciously, through long years of experience with the economically lower sections of the population they may have developed an insight about learning from the experiences of people. This was the reality in the case in some of the projects I have observed. Also, using participatory techniques in the training sessions where women discuss, play roles, indulge in different activities helps to create an informal and motivating atmosphere which makes women more eager and interested in training. Being better equipped in this sense will certainly have positive effect on the results.

In most of these programs, the co-ordinator of the training project is not responsible from training itself, but works with a group of experts who are carrying out the training on certain issues. The experts can be well informed on their subjects, but they may not be able to transfer it in the best way if they do not know the capacities, needs and expectancies of the participants. Therefore, it is very important for the expert group to work with the co-ordinator, learn the aims of the organisation, discuss the needs of women, become aware of their potential and plan the sessions as part of a meaningfully integrated program. Pre-training preparation is an issue which is usually not given the importance it deserves in many of the training programs.

It may also be the case that the "charisma" of the co-ordinator or the trainer which actually helps to establish positive relations in the group during the training program may also result in excessive dependency of the participants on her as stated before. While providing support to women or helping them to organise, the co-ordinators or trainers should be careful not to take the full responsibility of finding solutions to their problems or give the impression that they are always there for them.

## VII. A Final Word: Some Considerations on the Constraints and Future Prospects of the Empowerment Programs

Definitions of empowerment emphasise mainly two forms of change:

- *a change at the personal level* which involves movement to positions of more self-confidence and independence to make choices and decisions
- *collective change* through co-operation with others and organising for social and political action

Women, becoming more aware of their inner power, gaining confidence and self-respect by passing through the processes of empowerment are personally changing and this *change*, whatever its degree and intensity is, is certainly starting a *break* from the existing system of roles and references. However, it is taking place within the larger system, with its well-established norms regarding the positions of women, its formal educational programs and other social and cultural institutions reproducing the gender roles shaping the lives of women. The social system is acting with an invisible inertia to push the women back into their positions of compliance, obedience and unquestioning passivity. Under these conditions it is hard to resist especially when so many women still strongly identify with the roles defined for them by the society. It is not so easy to change.

The personal power gained through these training programs needs to be cared and nurtured continually with other programs of support (including programs aiming practical and strategic needs) and especially through *collective power* gained by indulging in action with other women and women's organisations. Therefore, the empowerment training programs demand engagement in insistent, continuous work in the field of theory and practice since the programs need to be evaluated, thought over and revised according to new needs and conditions. This also means that the sustainability of the projects are of utmost importance. Women who are involved in these programs should set their hearts and minds on serious work for long years.

Until now, none of the training programs in Turkey had follow-ups or systematic evaluation programs included in the projects. We are still lacking

the criteria to evaluate the effectiveness of these programs. We also need to review the similarities and differences in content and implementation in the different training programs which can be classified under the general heading of 'empowerment training'. Carefully designed assessment programs can act as feedback for the development of further training programs. Follow-ups and evaluation programs may also necessitate the incorporation of women with different expertise to the training projects. This in turn will extend the project period resulting in the expansion of the project budgets which the donor organisations are usually reluctant to consider.

Empowerment of women also requires change in men. Women express and emphasise the role of their husbands or other male authority figures in their family during and after these training sessions. A negative reaction at home or a lack of understanding and respect for what the women have gained in these programs may act as a disempowering factor. This situation points out again the need of gender training programs for women and men and in mixed sessions when possible.

International experience reflects that organising and acting together with other women for their practical or strategic needs is a critical point of the empowerment training programs. For this kind of development to take place, it is important for women participating in these programs to be informed on women's organisations and consider them as partners to work together. There are insufficiencies in the case of the feminist organisations in making themselves better understood by grassroots women and weaknesses in their strategies in dealing with issues which are of primary concern to these groups (such as poverty, unemployment etc.). The empowerment training programs can also be used to overcome part of these weaknesses by including sessions introducing and discussing the women's movement.

On the other hand, the unstable economic situation of the country and the pending poverty for a large section of the population can be considered both as a *negative factor* since it slows down the affect of these training programs, but at the same time a *chance* because it signals dramatically to the emergent need to organise. Women, under the burden of obtaining their daily bread and providing for the basic needs of their children, may view the training programs with mistrust and consider them a luxury. However, a good combination of sustainable projects empowering women economically

and training them to gain personal and collective power could work out efficiently under such conditions. This also demands solidarity and co-operation in terms of women's NGOs working on different issues.

The empowering role of the training programs in terms of initiating women to organise also needs to be considered in relation to the general historical development of civil society organisations in Turkey. The development of the civil society organisations in the sense they exist in the industrialised western countries is relatively new in Turkey. The political culture was highly centralised until 1945 and even after the way to pluralism was opened, the traditions holding civil society organisations under control were reflected in the legal framework regarding the rules and procedures to organise. Even after the middle of 1980s, when the civil society organisations flourished both in number and in the variety of issues they handled, they still do not have established traditions of working together; they are not considered as equal partners with the state and they have limited impact on the decisions related with the critical problems of the country. As part of the civil society organisations, this situation can also be expected to influence the women's organisations negatively. On the other hand, it should be taken into consideration that Turkey is not a country where women are disempowered and forced to abandon all their civil rights as in some countries under Islamic regime such as Iran (Afshar, 1998: 117-133). Still, it is also not a country where the strength of the local governments open the way to more active participation of people and civil organisations (including women's) in the decision-making processes as in the case of some of the Latin American countries (Macaulay, 1998: 86-109).

Besides considering the broader aspects of the development of the political structures and the political culture as factors influencing women to organise, we need to look more deeply into informal patterns of organisation among women in Turkey which bring them together for various types of activities within the confines of their gender roles. What are the possibilities for these patterns of social interaction to open the space for collective actions of women based on their practical or strategic needs? How can the strengths of these informal structures (which can be called public spheres specific to women) be carried over to more formal structures of civil society organisations? It is important for the training programs to be aware of the women's potentials of organisation in informal structures and networks and

build up on these so that women will be encouraged to make use of their skills in more formal fields of organisation which are dominated by men.

As in the case of many international concepts or norms, empowerment as a popular concept of 1990s found its way into the Turkish women's organisations through relations with international circles, international organisations and donors. It started to gain its local colours as it is used in different settings by different women's organisations in Turkey. Benefiting from international experience and especially from the experiences of the Third World women, taking into consideration the social realities of Turkey, creating the relevant evaluation criteria, increasing the co-operation and exchange of experience among women's organisations, paying attention to informal networks among local women are all issues to be considered to increase the effectiveness of the programs which in the long-run can open the way to new women's initiatives especially at the grassroots level and support the development of the civil society.

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