

# The Missing Piece In The Empowerment Equation

A Strategy for Delivering Personal Agency  
to Women in the Developing World

by Gail Straub

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Empowering women and girls with more choices and more freedoms is crucial to achieving a better future for all. Women’s agency and freedom are among the crucial means for enhancing development . . . Countries that have expanded opportunities for women and girls in education and work in recent decades have largely achieved greater prosperity and moderated population growth while limiting child mortality and achieving progress for all . . . These greater opportunities and freedoms have had truly astonishing results . . . There is an overwhelming need to pay attention to the needs of girls and women.*

—Amartya Sen, Nobel Laureate



**I**ndisputable evidence now demonstrates the direct relationship between a woman’s empowerment—her rights and freedoms—and the economic prosperity of her country.

Gender inequalities in the fields of education, employment, law, health, and marriage lead to pervasive and systemic political and social disparities. These vast inequities then create a vicious cycle of poverty, violence, political instability, and profound cultural alienation. Conversely, when women are empowered we see a virtuous cycle where democracies flourish, economies strengthen, and the fabric of society is uplifted. The World Development Report on Gender Equality and Development has identified women’s voice and agency as key drivers for gender equality. We have an increasingly urgent need to identify innovative ways to build women’s agency if we are to achieve real gender equity leading to political stability and economic prosperity.

Despite some evidence of progress toward more gender equality—most notably in education—substantial obstacles remain in reducing violence against women, improving their

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access to health services and basic needs, and increasing their representation in government, especially in developing nations. The focus on women is significant because time and again women have been identified as the main agents for equitable change and sustainable development. But measurable progress in improving the lives of women in the developing world has been slow. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are an integrated set of seventeen goals for extending the benefits of globalization to all citizens of the world. Women’s empowerment and gender equality cuts across all seventeen of the SDGs. Although the aim of the SDGs is to achieve real progress by 2030, in many developing countries gender inequality remains the major obstacle in meeting these goals. Achieving the SDGs will be impossible without the true empowerment of women. But this important word, “empowerment,” is now so overused and employed to cover such vast territory that it no longer carries specific meaning. The intent of this paper is to unpack the word “empowerment”—and in particular to flesh out the concept as it applies to human agency, a key driver to actualizing women’s empowerment.

The emphasis in most pertinent definitions of empowerment is on the outer resources that can serve as catalysts for positive change. The World Development Report defines it this way:

Empowerment means enhancing the capacity of poor people to influence the state institutions that affect their lives by strengthening their participation in political processes and local decision-making. And it means removing the barriers—political, legal and social—that work against particular groups and building the assets of poor people to enable them to engage effectively in markets.



The vast majority of development programs focus on the improvement of these critical outer resources, which so visibly support essential advances in the lives of people the SDGs are meant to serve. Human agency—the second fundamental component of empowerment, which can be thought of as the capacity to develop inner resources—receives far less attention. But until the power of human agency is more widely understood, the dollars devoted to funding outer resources will not be leveraged nearly as well as they could be. Many forward-thinking development professionals posit that the strong partnership between outer resources and human agency is the catalyst that may ultimately convert the SDGs from rhetoric to reality.

How *exactly* then does a woman gain the inner resources of empowerment that lead to agency? Since 1981, as the cofounder of the Empowerment Institute (EI), I have thought a great deal about this question. Over a period of almost four decades EI has trained hundreds of thousands of people in regions as culturally diverse as Afghanistan, Africa, India, the Middle East, Russia, China, Europe, and the United States. Launched in 2010, the most recent EI program is IMAGINE: A Global Initiative for the Empowerment of Women, focusing specifically on disenfranchised women in Afghanistan, Africa, India, and the Middle East.

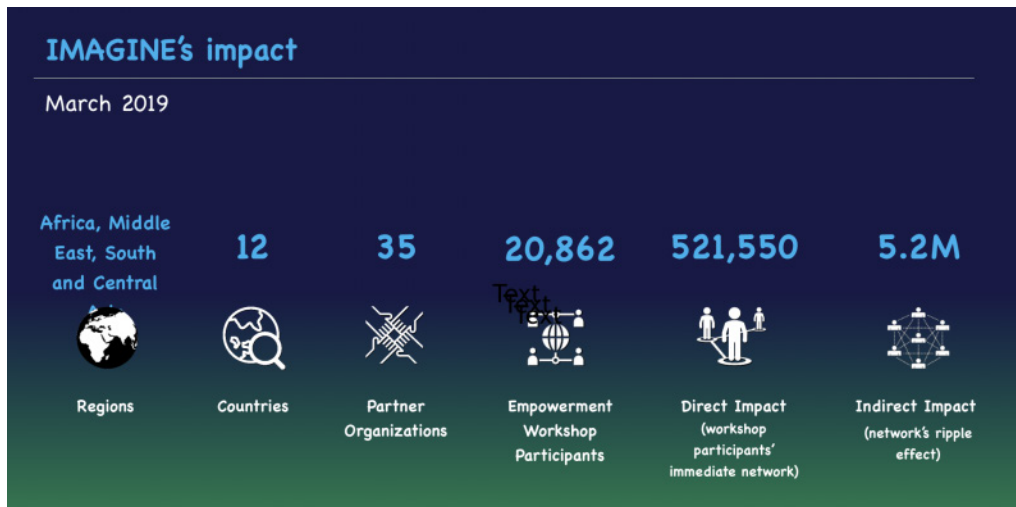
The goal of IMAGINE is to empower women throughout the developing world with the agency to transform the cycle of poverty and create thriving lives and communities. Over the past ten years the initiative has moved through its pilot and demonstration phases. The Johns Hopkins University Research on Agency assessed the outcomes achieved over that time frame in this way: “The IMAGINE program was able to facilitate human agency in a relatively short period of time with minimal costs. Participants expressed high levels of agency and hope for the future which resulted in them being:

- ✦ 3 times more likely to report improved income,
- ✦ 10 times more likely to report improved health,
- ✦ 15 times more likely to report improved relationships.

The capacity of this process to catalyze behavior change is impressive and has tremendous potential to positively impact the lives of millions of women worldwide.”

The following list summarizes the reach of the program:

- ✦ Regions: Africa, the Middle East, and South and Central Asia
- ✦ Countries: 12
- ✦ Number of partner organizations: 35
- ✦ Number of certified Empowerment Workshop Facilitators: 100
- ✦ Empowerment Workshop participants: 20,862
- ✦ Direct impact (workshop participants’ immediate network): 521,550
- ✦ Indirect impact (networks’ ripple effect): 5,215,500



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Empowerment Workshops led by IMAGINE’s approximately one hundred certified regional trainers across Africa, the Middle East, and South and Central Asia have created a ripple effect within the twelve countries and across the regions generally. These impacts have prepared the ground for the capacity to scale. The long-term goal is to grow the IMAGINE movement throughout the developing world to reach the tipping point by 2025, when this agency-building social innovation becomes ubiquitous within the women’s empowerment space.

The Institute defines “empowerment” as the expansion of a person’s capacity to *create positive behavioral change by working directly with their own visions and goals*. EI enables the development of agency and positive behavioral change through an intensive four-day training called the Empowerment Workshop designed to teach as well as to allow women to practice its proven methodology. Every aspect of the four-day workshop guides a woman to rely on her own inner resources in order to establish her behavior change, and the method provides tools for the ongoing practice required for a woman to exercise control over her life and gain mature agency when she goes back to her community. IMAGINE’s Empowerment Workshop calls on participants to engage with seven critical areas of their lives: emotions, relationships, sexuality, body, money, work, and spirituality. These seven life areas are directly relevant to the World Development Report’s focus on five areas of agency: (1) women’s access to and control over resources; (2) freedom of movement; (3) freedom from the risk of violence; (4) decision-making over family formation; and (5) having voice in society and influencing policy. The workshop is taught by regional facilitators who have completed the rigorous year-long IMAGINE Master Trainer Certification Program (IMTCP).

What follows is an in-depth analysis of the Empowerment Institute’s methods and how they apply to human agency in developing countries as well as EI’s current scaling strategy for reaching the point of diffusion by 2025.



## Human Agency

*People have to be seen as being actively involved, given the opportunity in shaping their own destiny, and not just as passive recipients of the fruits of cunning development programs.*

—Amartya Sen, Nobel Laureate

In his groundbreaking book *Development as Freedom*, Amartya Sen defines agency as “what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important.” More specifically, his definition of human agency is “people’s ability to act on behalf of goals that matter to them.” Sen passionately argues that this ability is a core ingredient of both development and positive social change. Along with Sen’s work, Dr. Albert Bandura’s seminal research on the theory of human agency is important in laying the framework for a deeper discussion of empowerment. A distinguished professor at Stanford University, Bandura is considered a leading thinker in the field of behaviorism and cognitive psychology. In his article “Human Agency in Social Cognitive Theory,”<sup>1</sup> we find this passage:

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1. Albert Bandura, “Human Agency in Social Cognitive Theory,” *American Psychologist* 44, no. 9 (Sept. 1989): 1175–1184.

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Converging lines of evidence reveal that personal and social change rely extensively on methods of empowerment. These approaches achieve their effects by equipping people with the requisite knowledge, skills, and resilient self-beliefs of efficacy to alter aspects of their lives over which they can exercise some control.



Bandura asserts that empowerment and human agency have external as well as internal factors, and he goes on to say that only when both are addressed can full agency be achieved. Whereas development is better equipped to address the external constraints—legal, economic, and social—that inhibit agency, programs that deal with people’s internal behaviors and beliefs are more crucial for affecting personal agency. Again, to quote Bandura, “Among the mechanisms of personal agency, none is more central or pervasive than people’s beliefs about their capabilities to exercise control over events that affect their lives.”

How can personal agency be increased? This is the central question Bandura explores in his work, and after several decades of thinking and writing about the issue, he believes the answer lies in increasing a person’s capacity for “resilient self-beliefs of efficacy to alter aspects of their lives over which they can exercise some control.” Stated simply, if a person’s self-efficacy is strong, then they are more willing to take action to change the conditions of their lives for the better. Furthermore, people’s self-efficacy beliefs determine their level of motivation and how long they will persevere in the face of obstacles. The stronger their belief in their capabilities, the greater and more sustained their efforts.

Since life is full of setbacks, challenges, and inequities, a person needs a robust sense of personal efficacy if she is to succeed. This sense of self-efficacy provides the resilience required for women to walk the long road to empowerment and emancipation.

A discussion of agency and self-efficacy must consider its relevance in both Western and non-Western cultures. Is agency only valued by individualistic societies and not collectivist cultures? Does it only emerge as a value in post-material societies where material needs are largely satisfied? Because the SDGs are primarily focused on non-Western populations, these

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are more than just academic questions. In Dr. Sabina Alkire's excellent article "Subjective Quantitative Studies of Human Agency,"<sup>2</sup> she argues that human agency is relevant across communities but that the value of individualism differs among people and cultures. Alkire submits that a key step in understanding agency in non-Western collectivist cultures is to distinguish between individualism and autonomy. Alkire cites the "Self-Determination Theory" in finding the relevance of agency across cultures as well as in defining autonomy:

On the basis of empirical study Self-Determination Theory (SDT) identified the three basic psychological needs that are pre-requisites to well-being that pertain across cultures: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These needs are innate psychological nutriment that are essential for ongoing psychological growth, integrity, and well-being.

SDT describes autonomy in the following way: A person is autonomous when his or her behavior is experienced as willingly enacted and when he or she fully endorses the actions in which he or she is engaged and/or the values expressed by them. People are therefore most autonomous when they act in accord with their authentic interests or integrated values and desires.

Thus an autonomous person can be either more individualist ascribing greater priority on the individual's goals or preferences; or more collectivist ascribing greater priority on the needs and goals of the group.



Alkire concludes:

What threatens autonomy is not individualism and not dependence, but rather coercion. For example a person could be acting within rules set by a parent, or by social norms, or by law, and doing so autonomously because the person internally endorsed those rules. Alternatively, one could be acting in the same way but feeling utterly coerced and oppressed by the parent, the norms, or the law. In the first instance, autonomy—and indeed agency—is not compromised; in the second it is.

In our discussion on the specific methods of empowerment, this understanding of autonomy will be pivotal to the exercise of agency for women in developing countries. Human agency is a relevant value in both Western and non-Western cultures. This agency—the capacity for human beings to make choices and to act on those choices, altering their environment—is the missing piece of the empowerment equation. The community leader Dr. Awadiya Ahmed-Yahia has said:

"Empowerment" is often interpreted as economic enhancement. However women in the developing world need more than just economic enhancement. A traumatized woman who was raped, or a woman who witnessed her

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2. Sabina Alkire, "Subjective Quantitative Studies of Human Agency," *Social Indicators Research* 74 (2005): 217–260.

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husband and six children killed in front of her, cannot move forward with her economically enhanced life until she is taught the inner tools that help her heal her wounds and take back control of her life.

How *exactly* then does a woman learn the inner tools of empowerment that help her to take back control of her life? Since 1981, as the cofounder of the Empowerment Institute (EI), I have thought a great deal about this question. Over a period of almost four decades EI has trained hundreds of thousands of people in regions as culturally diverse as Afghanistan, Africa, India, the Middle East, Russia, China, Europe, and the United States. Launched in 2010, the most recent EI program is IMAGINE: A Global Initiative for the Empowerment of Women, focusing specifically on disenfranchised women in Afghanistan, Africa, India, and the Middle East.

The goal of IMAGINE is to empower women throughout the developing world with the agency to transform the cycle of poverty and create thriving lives and communities. Over the past ten years the initiative has moved through its pilot and demonstration phases. The Johns Hopkins University Research on Agency assessed the outcomes achieved over that time frame in this way: “The IMAGINE program was able to facilitate human agency in a relatively short period of time with minimal costs. Participants expressed high levels of agency and hope for the future which resulted in them being:

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The Institute defines “empowerment” as *the expansion of a person’s capacity to create positive behavioral change by working directly with their own visions and goals*. This definition is congruent with Amartya Sen’s framing of human agency as people’s ability to act on behalf of goals that matter to them, and it also corroborates Albert Bandura’s theory that enhancing a person’s sense of personal efficacy is a key to empowerment. EI enables the development of self-efficacy and positive behavioral change through an intensive four-day training called the Empowerment Workshop designed to teach as well as to allow women to practice its proven methodology. What follows is an analysis of the Empowerment Institute’s methods and how they apply to human agency in developing countries.

## The Role of Interiority in Empowerment

*We teach a person everything except to know himself, to know how to live.*

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile*, 1762

Though Jean-Jacques Rousseau lived three centuries ago, he understood the need for interior empowerment. One of the earliest advocates of introspection, Rousseau had a desire for human beings to understand their own interiority in order to understand themselves in relationship to society, thus becoming effective citizens. He challenged his eighteenth-century compatriots to confront and understand their full inner complexity. Throughout his seminal works, Rousseau argued that the development of character required a person to be responsible for his or her own thoughts, and that it is the power of the mind that shapes destiny. This eminent and provocative thinker believed that only when people’s interior lives were sufficiently developed could they listen to their own inner voice and trust their own beliefs, thus finding true freedom from the seduction of outer societal influences. Leading to an expansion of meaning and value, this awakened consciousness allowed a person to live to his or her fullest potential.



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With these radical concepts, the visionary Rousseau laid the early foundations for current-day interior empowerment. Indeed, as the Empowerment Institute introduces these very same ideas in a modern framework to the women in our IMAGINE program across Afghanistan, Africa, India, and the Middle East, they can seem as radical as they did in Rousseau's time. As we teach women to be responsible for their own thoughts, they take their destiny back into their own hands. As they learn to trust their own voices and discern their own beliefs, they are no longer dependent on outer authority—political, cultural, or religious—to either direct or impart meaning to their lives. Central to EI's methodology is helping individuals develop a strong sense of inner authority so that they are able to resist not only the cultural norms that oppress them but also the whims of popular culture that can lead to superficial aspirations. *Women in the developing world—indeed all women—need a fully developed sense of self to sustain the courage and resilience required in resisting such powerful forces. Revolution has always taken place just as much inside the psyche as outside on the streets.*



## The Empowerment Workshop

*For the oppressed to be free they must have an education that stimulates and sustains critical consciousness.*

—Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

Taught over four days, IMAGINE's Empowerment Workshop calls on women to review seven critical areas of their lives: emotions, relationships, sexuality, body, money, work, and spirituality. These seven life areas are directly relevant to the World Development Report's focus on five areas of agency: (1) women's access to and control over resources; (2) freedom of movement; (3) freedom from the risk of violence; (4) decision-making over family formation; and (5) having voice in society and influencing policy. As a woman engages with EI's seven vital life areas, she understands the power she has to change her life in positive ways. She gives voice, often for the very first time, to deep trauma and painful memories; she stands up to her husband, stating her own demands; she leaves a violent or abusive marriage; she starts a small business and manages her own finances; she prioritizes her own health and not just

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the well-being of her family; she goes back to school or runs for political office. And as she listens to other women's life stories, she gains valuable perspective on how together she and her peers can impact effective changes in their communities. Though taking the required four days can be difficult for some women, this extended time for reflection and practicing the Empowerment Framework is essential in order for real self-efficacy to take root.

Every aspect of the four-day workshop teaches a woman to rely on her own interiority in order to determine the unique direction of her life. Because listening to and trusting one's own voice is so central to gaining agency, the role of the facilitator is distinctly nonhierarchical; rather than answering as an expert, the facilitator frequently returns the questions back to the women. EI's facilitators are trained to teach by example, using their own life stories, complete with their ups and downs, challenges, and triumphs. As the leader, the facilitator is eminently human, and during the four days, she, like the participants, continues on her journey of learning and growing. Below, several EI facilitators give examples of how they teach the workshop using their own life stories. Busayo, Usha, and Elissa are all gifted Empowerment facilitators who have overcome challenges in their own lives.

**Busayo Obisakin: Women's Inspiration Center, Ile-Ife, Nigeria**



Normally the women in my part of Nigeria are used to workshops that teach them the simple tools of a vocation. When I facilitate the Empowerment Workshop I start by sharing how this work has changed my entire life, both inside and outside. I tell them that I have overcome many challenges and fears to be able to build a successful NGO to empower women. My marriage is stronger and I have overcome hypertension. I tell my women that I myself use the methodology and tools that I am about to teach them on a daily basis. It has helped me fulfill my greatest dreams and my purpose in life. And if they use these simple but powerful tools of the Empowerment Workshop, they too can fulfill their dreams.

**Usha Choudhary: Vikalp Sansthan, Rajasthan, India**

I share my life story with women in the workshop . . . how I saw my dream and wanted to fulfill it. I tell them that I am not an extraordinary woman. I am like you and my life is very close to your situation but I saw my dream to help other women and I was passionate about fulfilling it. This passion gave me the courage to achieve my dream.

In order to follow my dream I faced many challenges and a lot of suffering in my life. It has not



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been an easy journey. I didn't want to live like my mother and other neighborhood women. I wanted to complete my education. Like many of the women in my Empowerment Workshops, I come from a very feudal and patriarchal family with strong social norms about girls and women. When I was fourteen years old my family wanted me to enter a child marriage and they arranged for this. But I didn't want this marriage so I refused and I broke the engagement. This was very difficult and unheard of in my culture. Then I faced lots of problems and violence. Because of my choice I was beaten for many years. I was confined physically but they could not lock up my dream. I knew that my mission was to give the power of choice to the women in India: the choice to study, the choice to work, and the choice to marry when they want to. So I have devoted my life to this and I have helped many women in India to stand up for their choices. My struggles have made me stronger and more empowered.

**Elissa Shamma: STEPS, Beirut, Lebanon**



Sharing stories from my own growth journey has helped a lot in teaching the Empowerment methodology. I use my own stories in all the seven life areas. For example in the body I share very openly my own struggles. Like so many women in Lebanon, the changes and demands I put on my body relied heavily on our society's view of how a woman's body should look and should feel. Because of these norms, for many years I went on diets and did exercise programs only because my society was telling me I should look and be a certain way. But when I started on my own empowerment journey I realized I didn't really want any of these things. Through the Empowerment methodology I came to understand that all I needed was to listen to my own body. By listening closely I knew what my body needed to feel better and be truly healthy. I share with my workshop participants that this new journey with my body has taught me to listen to my own voice in many other areas of my life: my emotions, my relationships, and my work. To identify and break free of society's limiting beliefs is an essential part of the Empowerment Workshop.

A compelling aspect of this extended four-day format is that the material challenges not only a woman's mind but also her emotions and her spirit. Personal agency requires engaging all three dimensions of the human experience. As current research in the fields of neuroscience, psychology, and behavioral economics shows, behavior change takes place through a complex partnership between emotion and intellect. *Internal beliefs about taking control of one's life live deep inside the heart as well as in the brain. To strengthen self-efficacy, a woman needs to connect with what really matters to her, with the dreams and goals that live in her heart.* Often these yearnings are spiritual, which is in keeping with neuroscientific findings that tell us that our deepest longings often tend toward the transcendent more than the material.

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An approach to agency that includes emotions and spirit as well as the brain is necessary because so many women in developing countries need to release long-repressed, painful emotions in order to feel strong enough to hold a job, go back to school, or leave a violent marriage. Many have survived the unspeakable horrors of war, genocide, or rape, as well as witnessing the brutal deaths of family members. Connecting with the emotions associated with these traumas is a necessary step on the journey to empowerment, and it cannot be passed over, no matter how uncomfortable it is. The emotional despair that so many women experience as a result of centuries of oppression is something they must feel and express in order to heal.



When IMAGINE facilitators in Lebanon presented the Empowerment Workshop to Syrian women living in the refugee camps, here is what they observed:

All the women said they had never had such an experience as this. They talked about very painful things such as rape, the brutal death of family members, and the loss of home that they had never discussed before. Telling their painful stories was like releasing the poison trapped inside them. When they were free of the poison they could feel hope and dignity again.

A Rwandan genocide survivor and Empowerment facilitator from partner NGO Duhozanye Association, Izere Vedastine, said this:



When I present the Empowerment Workshop to widows who survived the Rwandan genocide here is what I observe: These widows have lost family members, they were tortured and raped, and they gave birth to their children from rape. Due to the trauma these women had lost any hope for the future or any sense that they could rebuild their lives. In the workshop first I teach them how to express and release their pain in a safe space. I teach them that this is an essential step in their empowerment. Next with the Empowerment methodology I teach them

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how to take back their voices and their power. Then slowly they are able to begin to build visions for their future like going back to work or to school, or starting a small business.

To encourage the engagement of mind, emotion, and spirit, diverse tools are used throughout the four days. Socratic questioning strengthens a woman's trust in her own inner wisdom. Meditations guide her to her interior, where her inner voice lives. Guided visualizations allow women to connect with their visions and longings through expressive drawings. Small groups and dyads allow women to speak openly, finding their voice in a safe way. Dancing and singing together bring joy after the release of pain and trauma. Women in the developing world who have gone through the Empowerment training are unfamiliar with these tools at the start, but most of them seem excited by the possibilities they offer, and they eagerly embark on this adventure of self-inquiry.

Empowerment facilitator Fatima-Zahra Laaribi from the High Atlas Foundation in Morocco describes why the experiential process is effective for the women in her communities:

Almost all the tools used in the Empowerment Workshop are new for the women in the communities that I serve. I find that asking questions, the central premise of the Empowerment pedagogy, builds the self-confidence of the women. Rather than me giving them answers, which they often want, I almost always respond to their inquiries by asking them a question so that they begin to trust their own inner wisdom. And the questions also play an important role in my understanding the women's ideas and their way of thinking. When I facilitate the workshop with devout Muslim communities the women especially enjoy the guided meditations. Meditation is an integral part of Islam, believed to open the door of revelation and to be an essential aspect of spiritual development.

But it's the tool of guided visualization that is truly remarkable for the women that the High Atlas Foundation serves. Because this tool relies on the ability to imagine or visualize, the women in the Empowerment Workshop realize that their imagination is just as important as knowledge. Many of the women I serve have little formal education, which they associate with knowledge. But their imagination is unlimited! Through the guided visualizations they express their visions, innovations, and creativity. They can clearly visualize their capacity to change their own lives and to make their communities better. They understand that they do not need more education in order to create and implement these visions. I think the imagination is perhaps the most underutilized and important resource for these women's empowerment.

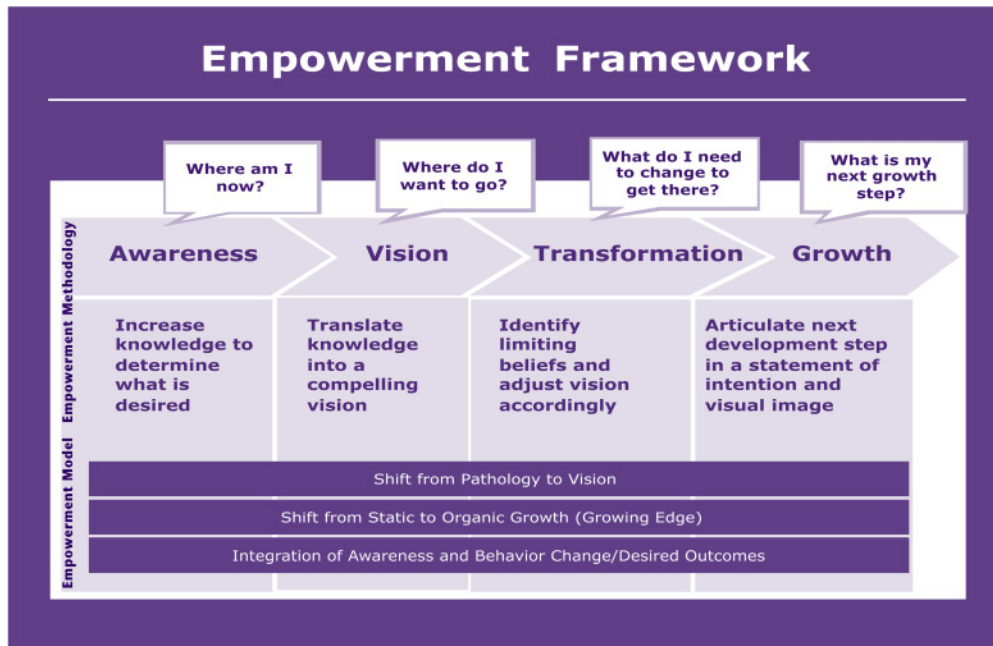


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## The Empowerment Framework: Tending Your Own Garden

*Our minds aren't passive observers simply perceiving reality. Our minds actually change reality. In other words the reality we will experience tomorrow is in part a product of the mindsets we hold today.*

—Dr. Alia Crum, Stanford Research Scientist



### The Shift from Pathology to Vision

Once a woman has committed to the four-day process, understanding that she will be engaging her mind, heart, and spirit, she begins her immersion into the Empowerment Framework. First she learns about the *Shift from Pathology to Vision*. Essentially this concept asserts that what we place our mental attention on grows. The simple metaphor of cultivating a garden, immediately grasped by all women in the workshops regardless of whether they are educated or nonliterate, illuminates this idea nicely: *Water the seeds of your interior garden, not the weeds; focus on possibilities, not problems.* Once introduced to this essential building block of empowerment, a woman becomes aware that she is responsible for her own thoughts. For many women in developing countries, the concept that their minds have the power to help shape their destinies is both radical and liberating. In starting to take responsibility for the contents of her mind, a woman begins to build the self-efficacy that is so basic to behavior change.

In the *Shift from Pathology to Vision* a woman is also learning about the magnetic power of vision. Without a compelling vision, most people will naturally focus their minds on their fears and insecurities, problems, and setbacks. With an invitation to create a vision of what's possible, the imagination is opened up and many more possibilities come forth. Focusing on the vision of what she wants and how to create it is much more enlivening than focusing on her problems and how to solve them.

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This shift in focus is significant because it motivates a woman to take action. As women in the developing world begin to practice this principle, focusing on what they want and how to create it rather than on problems and how to solve them, they are often surprised at how quickly it shifts their entire orientation toward life. Their positive visions pull them toward changing their behaviors, whereas before their negative views of life had pushed them away from wanting or believing they could change. With the magnetism of her vision, a woman moves into hope, motivation, and action. For instance, Fatima, a young woman from Kabul, describes her own experience of the shift from pathology to vision:

Before all I focused on all day long was my sadness, my hurt, and my anger. I was suffering from my father's death, losing a job I loved, from my life in the past, missing the opportunity to continue my studies, and from all the violence against women in my country, Afghanistan. I only knew how to be a victim, powerless, useless, and hopeless. I felt small and sorry for my life. I didn't know that I had a choice of where to focus my thoughts. Then I started with the tools we learned, trying to remember to water my seeds, not my weeds. In the workshop for the first time I created visions for my life; I had goals and dreams that I wanted to accomplish. I started feeling confident and hope started to grow again in my heart. I decided to go back to school.



Empowerment facilitator Tejaswi Sevakari is the founder of the NGO Saheli, serving women sex workers in Pune, India. Over the past eight years Tejaswi has offered the Empowerment Workshop to hundreds of women sex workers. In order for these women to gain agency it's critical that they learn to shift their focus from the pathology of all their problems to a vision of the changes they want to make in their lives. Tejaswi describes Moni's powerful story of transformation:

Twenty-five-year-old Moni is the mother of a beautiful eight-year-old daughter. Seven years ago her husband sold Moni as a sex worker in order to make money for him. Moni was not at all willing to become a sex worker but her husband forced her to continue working to earn money for him. During the Empowerment Workshop, Moni really understood the principal of shifting the focus of her attention on all her problems, to instead focusing on precise visions of the changes she wanted in her life. She understood "water the seeds, not the weeds." She took the workshop several times and attended the ongoing Empowerment support groups to strengthen her mind shift. Moni prepared her steps for changing her life. With support from Saheli, Moni stopped giving money to her husband, and she started saving for herself and her daughter. Her daughter is now going to a good school and Moni has also started going to school studying alongside her daughter! This courageous woman is now completely out of sex work and she has started her own beautician business. Moni wants to help other sex workers find their strength and empowerment.



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## The Shift from Static to Organic Growth

The second part of the Empowerment Model is a *Shift from Static to Organic Growth*. Like a plant in a garden, a woman's growth is ongoing and organic. Her life is not static, but rather a continuous evolution. There is always the next place of growth, which we call the *growing edge*. In a plant, the bud is the place where change happens, where new growth occurs; we can think of it as the plant's growing edge. In a person, the growing edge is where she experiences the greatest aliveness and vitality, the place of most fertile potential. Because it is just being born, a growing edge is fragile; it can feel scary or exhilarating, or both. Life is a series of ever-changing, evolving, growing edges in all seven of the empowerment areas. There is no right or wrong growing edge; there is just ongoing learning and growing. Recognizing that all humans are engaged in a continuous series of growing edges, a woman often feels more compassion for herself and others.

The concept of the growing edge is liberating for women in the developing world for several reasons. *Many oppressed women exist in fixed states where despair and self-loathing are common. The shift from static to organic growth allows her to believe that growth is still possible, that she can take small appropriate steps on her growing edge.* The idea that her life has organic movement brings hope for the future, greater self-acceptance, and motivation to change. By focusing on ongoing learning and growing, women are more willing to take the risks inherent in changing their limiting behaviors in their relationships, jobs, and physical and emotional health. Self-efficacy beliefs become more resilient as women begin to recognize challenges as a natural part of the evolving growth process. Here is how Nasira worked with the concept of the growing edge:

I am one of the few women generals in Afghanistan. The men are constantly undermining and sabotaging me. In my old static worldview I simply accepted this and felt I had to live with it. I was depressed and no longer growing as a person or a professional. When I began to shift to a more organic view of life I saw each of these encounters as a growing edge challenging me to move forward with my life. I began to stand up for myself, confronting the men and the government. When they tried to take away my decision-making power, I fought back. All my experiences became opportunities to learn and grow. Now I am known as the general who fights corruption.



And Brigitte from Ghana shared the following example of working with the growing edge in the area of relationships:

In the view of many Africans, a woman is not fulfilled or realized if she remains single or unmarried. In my old static view of relationships every encounter that I had with a man was meant to end up in marriage. If I got married, then I would be validated. Every time this didn't work, I always felt that I had failed yet again. When I shifted from my static point of view and started to allow organic

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growth, I started to see my relationships with men as opportunities for growth and learning. I was no longer failing, but seeing and accepting these people for what they were contributing to my ongoing development. Each person was there for a reason and for a purpose.

### **The Integration of Awareness and Behavior Change**

The final part of the Empowerment Model is the *Integration of Awareness and Behavior Change*. Women learn that just because they are aware of their desire for a healthy garden, this doesn't necessarily translate into behaviors that ensure a well-tended garden. While awareness deepens self-knowledge, by itself it rarely leads to a change in behavior or the fulfillment of a desired outcome. Each of us can list all the things we know we should do but don't. To integrate awareness with desired outcomes, we teach women an easy four-step process that leads to behavior change. Designated as the "Empowerment methodology," these four steps keep a woman focused on measurable results and give her the tools to sustain agency as she faces inevitable setbacks. Designed for accessibility and replicability, the four steps can be easily grasped and followed by women with little or no schooling.

**Step One—Awareness: *Where am I now?*** Such an apparently straightforward question can open a floodgate of pain. With this question, we are asking women to break their silence and tell their stories. This indispensable first step takes courage, giving voice to what has often been held inside for many years. Awareness teaches a woman that to change behavior she needs to start with an honest assessment of exactly where she is now. Telling the truth about her own story is a major step in taking back her voice and her power. In Jana's voice:

In the Syrian refugee camps we women felt like we had been thrown away and discarded by the entire world. Many of us had been raped or had witnessed the massacre of our family members. When we were asked to tell our stories we felt seen and heard for the first time. When I told my story I cried a lot, but then I could release my shame and anger. Only then was I ready to honestly think about my vision and goals.

Facilitator Mona El Gazzar describes an Empowerment Workshop for a women's labor union in Egypt:

The question "Where am I now?" was revolutionary for many of these women. Just over fifty-years old, Noha had taken an obligatory early pension and told us that she stayed at home alone all day. Here is a direct quote from her: "I don't work anymore, my husband died, and my kids got married and are no longer around. So I am just here waiting for death to come." When Noha said this out loud, she was shocked. Through the process of self-awareness she realized that she had a lot of life experience and also some teaching skills. She started voluntary work teaching some of her illiterate neighbors to read and write. This led her to a



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completely new life path where she started giving literacy lessons throughout her neighborhood. Noha is no longer waiting for death to come for her.

**Step Two—Vision: Where do I want to go?** Encoded in this simple query is the assumption that all human beings have the right to dream, to reach for their aspirations. Simply being asked the question can feel like receiving a gift of dignity. An uneducated Indian woman living in the urban slums of Pune, Meena, said:

Every day you keep telling us to think about what our dreams are. No one ever asked me this before. So finally I thought about what dream I really want. I never got a chance to finish school or learn how to read and write well. So now I am thinking that I can sit with my son once he returns from school and learn with him.



And Adetola, a Nigerian market woman, had this to say:

Before I believed that only prophetesses and prophets could have a vision. Now I understand that I can have a vision and follow it until I achieve my dreams. I see myself owning my own shop and saving the money for my children's school.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire speaks eloquently of the role of vision in human agency. “In encouraging poor people to find images of a possible better reality, we help them to step back from the unconscious acceptance of ‘reality’ and to perceive the world critically . . . People need to know they can be agents of their own liberation.” In this second step, women are applying to their lives what they have learned conceptually in the *Shift from Pathology to Vision*, focusing on possibilities, not problems. When they are carefully taught how to craft visions that are deeply personal and meaningful to them, women have a direct line to behavior change. Clementine survived rape during the Rwandan genocide. Here she reflects on the power of creating visions:

I was suffering a lot. I lost my whole family in the genocide, a job I loved, and the chance to continue my studies. All I could think about was the violence that I, along with every woman I knew, had suffered. I had lost all hope.

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When I was taught to carefully describe my vision of where I wanted to go, for the first time I began to believe that I could heal from my trauma. Maybe I could even return to school or go back to work. After I had created my own personal visions for the seven life areas of empowerment, I began to find my self-respect and the first rays of hope that this darkness would one day lift.

*Step Three—Transformation: What do I need to change to get there?* Once women have created their vision, they often find that all the reasons that they can't fulfill that dream begin visiting them, speaking loudly in their minds. We call these unsolicited visitors *limiting beliefs*. As they ask "What do I need to change in order to realize my vision?" women come face to face with the power of their minds to help shape their futures. It is in this step—when a woman takes full responsibility for her internal beliefs—that personal agency matures. This difficult and indispensable phase often challenges women to confront centuries-old cultural norms that oppress them. The World Bank's Report on Voice and Agency has articulated why this phase is so critical:

Norms, embedded within social, political and economic structures, are associated with the persistence of patriarchal attitudes and deep-rooted gender stereotypes that perpetuate gender inequality and can limit the extent to which formally recognized women's rights are realized in practice.



In Afghanistan, for example, a potent mixture of desperate poverty, the psychic devastation of war, and patriarchy's distorted views of Islam combine with such force that it takes tremendous strength for Afghan women to change their beliefs. But one woman at a time, one norm at a time, many women are doing just this—even if it means risking their lives. Brave Afghan women like Aziza are confronting archaic beliefs regarding shame and honor, fate and predestination:

When I examined my limiting beliefs, I finally began to see that God does not want me black and blue, bruised and raped all the time. God's will rules over mine but now I also believe that God gave me a will of my own to shape my own fate. This transformed belief gives me control of my life. I can leave my marriage and I can get a job. This belief does not mean that I am a bad Muslim. By taking a stand for my own destiny I can help the other women in my country.



As a feudal state in India, Rajasthan has a patriarchal mindset toward women that is deeply embedded. Women have never been taught that they have agency or choice, the capacity to dream, or even the right to small moments of happiness. It takes enormous courage for a woman to stand up against these social norms and stereotypes. Vali Bai, a fifty-year-old native of Rajasthan, describes how she began to turn around her limiting beliefs:

Like many women in my community I believed that marriage was my ultimate destiny. My fate was to serve my husband even though he beat me. And I would never raise my voice. Then I learned the tools in the Empowerment Workshop and I understood that my beliefs were my own to change. My limiting beliefs were like powerful bad weeds in the garden of my life and I could pull them out with my mind. I began to pull them out and to turn them around one by one. And I realized I deserved some happiness in my life and that I was here for a reason. I no longer accept any violence and I am organizing the women in my neighborhood to stop the violence.

And here is Shaima, also from Rajasthan:

After I left my violent husband I fell into a deep depression. Because of what I had been taught by society I believed that a single woman was of no worth to herself, her family, or society. I became lazy about my body and my work and I ignored my daughter. I became more and more sick. Then I went through the Empowerment Workshop, where I learned to identify the limiting beliefs that held me back. Finally I saw that these stereotypes about being a single woman were not true and that they were designed to hold me back. One by one I began to turn these old beliefs around. I took back my life and now I want to be a role model for my daughter. I want to raise her so that she knows how to transform her own limiting beliefs.

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Culturally entrenched limiting beliefs that oppress women physically, emotionally, and spiritually are slow to change. But as Carl Jung famously said, “Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate.” Fortunately more and more of the world’s disenfranchised women are discovering that their astonishing resilience is stronger than these oppressive forces.

**Step Four—Growth: What is my next growth step?** The final step in the Empowerment methodology asks women to articulate the growing edge in themselves that is calling for attention right now. The women have already learned that their growing edge is the place of most fertile potential inside themselves. Now they must identify it precisely, and craft a statement of intention regarding it. If the intention statement is overambitious and goes beyond a woman’s true growing edge, she will likely become overwhelmed, not honestly believing her intention can become reality. Conversely, if she is overly cautious or insecure in creating an intention statement, she will feel bored and unengaged. Since a woman’s genuine belief in her intention is the essential requirement for behavior change, it’s essential that her statement feels both authentic and engaging. And because thoroughly internalizing a new goal or intention is not simply a mental process, each woman is asked to create a visual image that reflects her growing edge and that will emotionally reinforce her intention statement. Her image, too, must feel personally honest and speak to her in a meaningful way.



Telling her story helped Jana to release her shame and to move forward with her life. Her next growth step was this: “I continue telling my story to inspire other Syrian women to speak their truth, and I listen carefully to their stories.” In her image Jana sits in a circle with other women as they share their stories.

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As a survivor of the Rwandan genocide, Clementine created this intention as her next step: “I cannot change the traumatic events of my past but I can allow them to make me stronger and help me go back to school.” In her visual image, Clementine is graduating from law school.

With her valiant work on changing her limiting beliefs, Aziza made this intention: “Trusting my own wisdom, I learn to be a baker so I can start my own bakery in my village.” In her visual image Aziza sees herself saving money and sending her daughters to school.

Once a woman has practiced these four steps of the Empowerment methodology, she has the tools needed for behavior change. But life will remind her immediately that growth is organic, not static, and so the empowerment model reinforces the notion that growing edges are always changing and evolving. As the inevitable challenges and setbacks come, a woman will need to go back to the four steps, adjusting her growing-edge intentions according to the feedback of her life experience. Her resilience is built on her capacity to see challenges as a natural part of her ongoing growth, rather than as failure or something to fear.

*It is the combination of the three-part Empowerment model grounded by the four steps of the methodology that provides a woman the tools required for personal agency. Through ongoing practice with these tools, she begins to exercise control over her life.* With the assimilation of the

Empowerment model and methodology a woman begins to integrate the concept of “negative and positive liberty” coined by the twentieth-century philosopher Isaiah Berlin. Negative liberty is the freedom from external obstacles, while positive liberty is freedom from internal constraints. *An empowered woman understands that her true liberation is built upon an ongoing commitment to eliminating both external and internal limitations.* She learns that to shape her destiny she must consciously work with her thoughts and that her motivation to change her life along with her society comes from deep inside herself. She focuses her attention on her vision of what’s possible, while understanding that this vision will have to be adjusted as inevitable challenges occur from the outside world. She sets goals while staying aware that she must identify and transform her limiting beliefs in order to really believe in these dreams. By trusting her own inner voice she identifies her precise growing edges, and these edges inform her of the parts of her life in which she can actively effect change. Gradually she understands her growth as an evolving process, by which setbacks can be used to strengthen and motivate.



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## Core Beliefs

With an understanding of the Empowerment Framework, a woman is now ready to do subtler work, going deeper into her interior to explore the complex makeup of her beliefs. Continuing with the garden metaphor, women learn that their core beliefs are like the soil of a garden. If the garden soil isn't healthy, no matter how good the seeds are, they aren't going to take root and grow. A woman's visions in the seven life areas are like the garden seeds; for them to grow, the soil of her interior garden has to be fertile. Whether they are literate or not, most women in developing countries completely understand this metaphor.



The Empowerment facilitator introduces the five core beliefs that make up the interior soil: *self-responsibility, self-esteem, trust, positive attitude, and flowing with change*. She gives concrete examples from her own life story, both where her core belief is healthy as well as where a belief needs to be transformed in order for her interior soil to be fertile. When women do an inner soil survey of their five core beliefs, their findings are usually revelatory.

Women are invited to comment after they do the inner soil test and arrive at an intention statement and image on their growing edge. Working on self-responsibility, Vivian from Ghana said:

I know that it is a farmer's responsibility to put fertilizer on their fields. So I must take self-responsibility to nourish my own soil. I am always blaming others but it gets me nowhere. My intention is: "I have the strength and power to make my life better, and I do this with the strength of God that is in me."

Eniola from Nigeria offers a powerful example of working the four steps with the core belief of self-esteem:

I have never seen anything good in myself. I always believed that I am not capable of doing anything. My husband will always tell me, there is nothing good in you, you cannot do anything right. Now my eyes are open and I see



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that it's up to me to improve this part of my soil. In my vision there are so many good things that I possess; I am a good mother, I am wonderfully made by God, I can think and create good things. I am growing much taller and developing muscles. I feel so strong. My limiting belief is that when my husband says that I am no good I will continue to believe him. But my new belief is that I will say this to him: "There are so many good things in me. I was able to bring four children into this world. I am the one working very hard to pay their school fees. And when I sell my goods, I make profits. Yes, there are so many good things in me." And my intention on my growing edge is: "I know there are so many good things in me and this makes me strong."

When working in a garden, it is useful to have garden tools—a rake, hoe, and spade, if you will—to help keep the soil healthy. The gardening tools of the inner garden are commitment, discipline, love, inner guidance, lightness, finding your own truth, and a support system. We call these sources of power. By learning how to use these sources of power effectively, a woman's core beliefs get healthier and her personal efficacy grows stronger. Now she can sustain not only her motivation to improve her life but also her resilience to face the obstacles.

### The Seven Vital Life Areas

As the days of the training unfold, women continue working with the Empowerment Framework, practicing the four steps and planting the seeds of their visions in the seven areas of their lives: *emotions, relationships, sexuality, body, money, work, and spirituality*. Though many women have experienced a lifetime of challenges, including extreme poverty, marriage at a very young age, little or no formal education, gender discrimination, poor health, and violence or other abuse, the relevance of these seven areas of life keep them completely interested and engaged.



When exploring emotions, women learn that expressing and releasing painful feelings can be liberating and enlivening. Experiential exercises help them to identify and let go of toxic emotions. As Hana said, telling a painful story is like "releasing poison trapped inside." For women like Nandita from Kolkata, the idea that they can consciously transform negative emotions is a powerful new idea:

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During these four days I have cried so much; I have released years of pain from being beaten by my husband. When I came here I was aching in every part of my body. I stayed covered and you could only see my eyes. Now for the first time I have taken off my cover; I want you to see my face. I am visible and I can stand up to my husband. My vision is to go back to school.

And Lullu from South Africa shared this insight:

During the emotions part of the workshop I realized that I am not the only one in the world with pain. I became aware of the fact that my pain was all the items that I had placed in my “black box” and never dealt with. I had to take a journey of self-discovery and open that black box and face my pain. I learned to release and let go of my anger. And I learned that I cannot conquer that which I cannot face.

In examining *relationships*, women learn the connection between self-worth and loving their families. With strong self-worth, they are more capable of caring for their families and their communities. This self-esteem combined with basic communication tools helps women to stand up to abusive spouses and to be better mothers. Alice from Ghana said:

I am always impatient and angry whenever my children do something wrong. I continue to rain abuses on them, which is not changing them for the better. Now I have some tools. In my vision, I remain calm and I correct them with love.

And here is Nisha, an Indian woman from the urban slums in Pune:

I used to hit my son every morning to make him go to school. After the workshop I feel better about myself and I tried a more loving approach. I spoke to him without yelling or forcing him to go. This morning he left for school willingly without incident.

As mothers, women are the keys to the emotional development of their children. As they learn to investigate their own interiors, trust their own voices, and connect with and release painful emotions, they both model and can teach their children these tools.

When discussing sexuality, the cross-cultural adaptation is especially relevant. Each Empowerment facilitator adapts this aspect of the workshop according to the cultural norms. But even in the most sexually oppressive parts of the world women are eager to talk about—often for the very first time—this important part of their lives.



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In order to create a safe environment, the facilitator once again shares examples of her own limiting beliefs and her transformations as well as deep-seated cultural limiting beliefs. Then the women talk in small groups, soon discovering that their concerns are remarkably similar. Vivian from rural Kenya said:

After our open discussion of sexuality, I saw that many other women have the same challenges that I have in my marriage. We had such frank conversations where we laughed a lot and helped each other. I now have a clear vision of how to please my husband more sexually, and also to feel more fulfilled myself.

And Hana, a Berber woman from a village in the High Atlas Mountains of Morocco, said:

We do not talk openly about sexuality in my culture. I learned a lot from listening to the other women and I see that it's important to talk about sexuality just like all the other areas of life. The older married women were able to offer a lot of wisdom to the younger unmarried women. And I have a new belief that I can enjoy sex and this is healthy and natural.

In talking about the *body*, women begin to see the impact of their mental attitudes on their physical health. As they create clear visions focusing on possibilities rather than problems, they are more motivated to care for their physical well-being. Through guided meditations, they learn how to take care of their bodies with relaxation techniques, healthy diet, and exercise. Like women all over the world, many find themselves caring for the physical needs of everyone except themselves. Obi from Lagos made this observation regarding her new understanding of her body:



Before this Empowerment Workshop I was a patient of the cardiology clinic and on drugs for blood pressure. After my workshop I was able to stop my drugs and my blood pressure keeps on improving. It is not that I am richer

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or that the pressures that landed me in the hospital have been removed. But I have been empowered to take back control of my life, to release negative emotions. I have learned to take good care of my body, exercise, eat good food, and relax. Before I cared for everybody else, but I never cared for myself and that was the reason for my high blood pressure.

And here is Hala from Jordan:

Before the Empowerment Workshop I never took care of my body. I would help everyone, my husband, my children, and my mother included. No one would help me. I would work very late into the night to get all my work done. I was always exhausted and I never gave time for myself. Now I know I need to find time for myself. I still do my job, and take care of my husband and my children, but I also take care of myself.



In exploring *money*, women once again see the power of their minds to transform limiting beliefs in order to improve their incomes. Working in small groups, they brainstorm ideas for generating more income, supporting one another to create visions and discussing next steps for doing so. Each woman is encouraged to think creatively about small steps she can take to bring in extra money. Here's what Naffissa from Kandahar said:

I am a single mother of four and I need more income for my family. During our money discussion the other women helped me with some steps I can take. My rent is too expensive and I am going to move to a smaller place. I learned that the Women's Ministry gives funding for heaters to single mothers and I can apply for that. Also another woman said she would help me update my résumé so I can get a better job. So I will register for an advanced English course to help me get the new job. From our days together I feel more confident in my skills.

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Salam from Jordan reflected on her newly formulated aspirations about money:

After the Empowerment Workshop I had my vision to build a stable income to help my family. I am divorced and it is hard. My daughter has diabetes so I need to help her. I love cooking and I really wanted to use my cooking skills. I wanted to work at a reputable place so I applied to the Hyatt Hotel. When I took the exam it was very difficult but my confidence was strong from the workshop. I passed the exam and I started cooking at the hotel. My next vision is to save money to buy my own house.

*Work* is closely connected to *money*, and these two aspects of the workshop go hand in hand. Through guided visualization, women create their visions for work: for example, getting a job for the first time, going back to school, looking for a better job, or starting their own business. Meena from Rajasthan said:

Before this workshop I did not have the courage or confidence to ask anyone for work. I felt worthless. But with my work vision I went to the baker to buy some bread, and I asked if he could use some assistance in his shop. He said yes, and now I have a good job.

And here is Manisha from Kabul:

Before I learned the empowerment tools I felt invisible at work and I was afraid to talk to my boss about the problems that women faced in the Ministry of Commerce. I was frustrated at work and felt that no one ever listened to me even though I had a lot of good ideas for improving this situation. After the workshop I felt strong and I went to my boss at the Minister's office. I presented my proposal for improving the workplace for women. I went to him five times with my ideas and finally they were accepted. Now I share the empowerment tools with all the women at work and with my family too.



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*Spirituality* is the final area of life that women explore. Again, the Empowerment facilitator carefully adapts the material into a culturally relevant context. For example, in Muslim countries passages from the Koran are woven throughout the workshop. In guided meditations and discussions, women are encouraged to deepen their personal sense of spirituality. A Nigerian market woman named Anyiam had this experience:

Though I am very religious and I go to church every Sunday, I had never thought about my spirituality in this way. I saw I had limiting beliefs that I needed to transform. I thought about how I could trust more and be a better person to my family. I am always praying for the things that I want from God, but from our guided meditations I learned to listen to God.

And it is during this final spiritual dialogue that many women give full voice to feelings of greater hope, dignity, courage, and strength that have been building inside them over the four days. Hana from Syria reflected:

I didn't believe that I could ever heal from my trauma. I didn't know my dignity could ever return. I didn't think I would ever feel hope for the future again. Now I know that all of these are possible for me. It's up to me now.

And Poonam from Kolkata said:

I have been living my life as a blind woman and now my eyes have been opened. No one has ever showed me how to see until now. Even though I am very poor and uneducated, I am starting a new life.



The final part of the workshop focuses on the ongoing upkeep of a garden—watering, weeding, harvesting, and replanting. Now the women have all the necessary tools for healthy interior gardens, but unless they use the tools on a regular basis, none of the important visions they have planted will ever grow. Women in the developing world fully grasp this concept. They are reminded to water their seeds, not their weeds, through careful attention to their thoughts, and to use the four steps in the methodology—*awareness, vision, transformation, growth*—to weed limiting beliefs, harvest fulfilled visions, and plant new seeds. Beginning with the first day of the training, the Empowerment Framework has emphasized that growth is organic, a continuous evolution in which there is always the next growing edge. When women understand the ongoing nature of their empowerment, they have a key to sustaining their behavior change. They know their agency is an ongoing practice. The Empowerment facilitator helps the women to form support groups—like gardening clubs—so that they can reinforce their new behaviors. Through peer support they encourage one another to continue growing and following through on their next growth steps.

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Throughout the four days women have been encouraged to share what they are learning with their husbands and their children. Now as the workshop comes to a close, this point is emphasized as each woman is asked to pass forward all that she has learned to her family and her community. EI estimates that each woman who has participated in the workshop will reach out to share the Empowerment tools with at least twenty-five people in her direct network. In the process, yet another level of self-efficacy and self-esteem blossoms, as she gains the respect of those she cares about. There is no better ambassador of human agency than an empowered woman going back to her own household and her own community. And because the Empowerment tools are simple and replicable, the potential for widespread diffusion beyond a participant's direct network is strong.



### Where Is the IMAGINE Initiative Now?

Over the past ten years the IMAGINE Initiative has moved through its pilot and demonstration phases and is now primed to begin its scaling phase. The following nine accomplishments demonstrate IMAGINE's readiness to scale:

1. Its Empowerment Workshop, based on research by Johns Hopkins University, *facilitates agency* in disenfranchised women in the developing world.
2. Its Empowerment Workshop can be *adapted to various contexts* including multiple women's issues, cultural and religious perspectives, nonliterate and intergenerational populations, and languages and dialects, as well as being adaptable for men and youth.
3. It can recruit *high-quality women's empowerment partner organizations* in the developing world to deliver the Empowerment Workshop.
4. It can *build the capacity* of these partner organizations to deliver the Empowerment Workshop.

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5. Its effectiveness increases *the fundability* of these partner organizations, thus motivating them to invest their resources of money and time in delivering this program.
  6. It enables the establishment of *long-term partnerships* with these partner organizations.
  7. It is *able to scale* through a train-the-trainer program within these partner organizations and through them to new partner organizations.
  8. It can maintain *high-quality Empowerment Workshop facilitation at scale*.
  9. It can *leverage its knowledge on creating agency* by disseminating it through women's empowerment networks throughout the world.



## IMAGINE's Impact

As of March 2019, 20,862 people, predominantly women, had participated in IMAGINE's four-day Empowerment Workshop. As a result these participants developed agency in their lives as described in the impact section of the IMAGINE website. These workshops were hosted by twenty-two NGOs in twelve countries.

An estimated 521,550 people were directly impacted through being part of the immediate network of people who participated in the Empowerment Workshop—this number represents family, friends, and community members who gained a sense of agency by observing the new social norms modeled by the Empowerment Workshop participant. This estimate is based on EI's informal research indicating that on average workshop participants speak to at least twenty-five people about their experience. And in many cases there is a direct transfer of knowledge about the Empowerment methodology and tools to those with whom they speak.



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If the ripple effect, defined as “the continuing and spreading results of an event or action,” is included, an estimate of at least ten times more people are indirectly impacted by the workshops. This is a conservative estimate; the indirect impact is potentially more, since introducing agency and significant new behaviors into relatively closed cultures, where change is normally slow, is highly noticeable. When one woman (or several) in an isolated rural community or low-income urban neighborhood changes her ability to earn money, starts a small business enterprise, better cares for her health, gets more education, or creates a more empowered relationship with her husband, many people notice and are influenced.

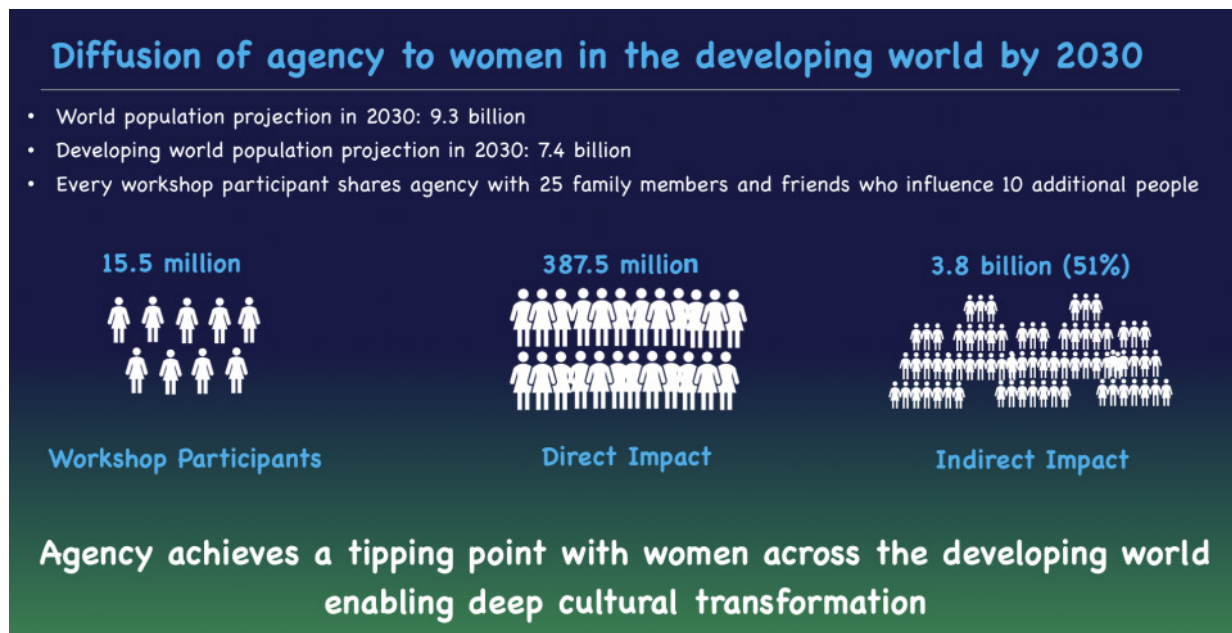
Based on this analysis EI conservatively estimates that the ripple effect of the 20,862 participants in the Empowerment Workshop has resulted in directly influencing more than half a million people within the workshop participants’ immediate networks; and that network adds to the ripple effect with an indirect impact resulting in some 5.2 million people experiencing increased agency in their lives. With Empowerment Workshops led by IMAGINE’s certified regional trainers taking place across Africa, the Middle East, and South and Central Asia, there is now a ripple effect within the countries and across the regions themselves. These impacts have prepared the ground for the capacity to scale.

## IMAGINE’s Scaling Capacity

The following elements are in place as IMAGINE begins its scaling phase.

1. **Countries:** IMAGINE is located in 12 countries that are strategically located across Africa, the Middle East, and South and Central Asia. This provides the diffusion platform both within the specific countries and across their regions.
2. **Partner Organizations:** IMAGINE is being delivered through 35 partner organizations that address the full spectrum of women’s empowerment issues (economic development, education, health, violence against women, political rights, and the environment). This provides the opportunity to bring agency to each of the niches within the women’s empowerment ecosystem.
3. **Master Trainers:** IMAGINE has 32 Empowerment Institute Certified Trainers participating in its training-of-trainers program. This TOT program builds certified trainers’ capacity to certify new Empowerment Workshop Trainers within their partner organizations as well as with external partner organizations, thus enabling IMAGINE to significantly increase its scaling capacity.
4. **Apprentices:** IMAGINE currently has 69 apprentices being trained to lead the Empowerment Workshop. These apprentices complete certification by January 2020.
5. **Training Capacity:** Including trainers and apprentices IMAGINE has 101 trainers who are able to lead the Empowerment Workshop.

## Where IMAGINE Wants to Go



The Empowerment Institute’s long-term goal is to grow the IMAGINE movement throughout the developing world to reach the phase where this agency-building social innovation becomes ubiquitous within the women’s empowerment space. The NGO to NGO train-the-trainer scaling pathway reaches a tipping point by 2025 and scale by 2030. This diffusion of agency will be enhanced by building the capacity of these IMAGINE partner organizations in second-order change to help them facilitate systemic transformation across their countries and their regions. With agency diffusing among its citizens the developing world comes closer to making gender equality a lived reality. And closer to demonstrating the irrefutable link between women’s empowerment and the economic and political stability of a country.

### CONCLUSION: THE IMAGINE INITIATIVE

*While investments are absolutely necessary to help solve the crisis of girls and women, they are simply not sufficient. We cannot address this crisis until we address broader cultural beliefs and practices that can help cause and perpetuate the crisis. We know that legal and cultural change is possible because we’ve seen it in countries around the world, including our own . . . But ultimately, for me, this issue isn’t just about politics or economics—for me, this is a moral issue . . . I plan to keep raising my voice on behalf of girls and women for the rest of my life.*

—Michelle Obama

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Women gain full human agency one belief and one growing edge at a time. Without personal agency many poor women stagnate with depression and despair, unable to help their families or communities. With strong self-efficacy women participate in all levels of society, leading the way to gender equity. As a woman's beliefs begin to transform—about her own voice, men, marriage, health, education, money, jobs, and religion—she becomes a positive force for her family, her community, and her culture. Each of her personal transformations is a triumph, but it is also fragile and reversible. The road to sustaining her empowerment is long and can be dangerous, requiring strong self-efficacy in order to maintain physical as well as emotional and spiritual stamina. But once a woman understands that her destiny is in her own hands, there is no turning back. Once she has developed her own interior enough so that she can listen to her own voice and trust her own beliefs, there is no limit to how much a woman can contribute to her society. And there is no limit to her ability to overcome the outer obstacles that will confront her.



Identifying ways to build human agency that engender hope, self-efficacy, and positive behavioral change is requisite to women's empowerment. Empowered women lead the way to gender equality, and gender equity leads to political stability and economic prosperity. Women living in poverty or other difficult circumstances may not have created those conditions, but they are the primary agents who must be engaged to change these circumstances for themselves and their society. Their power needs to be unleashed and fostered in every possible way. IMAGINE hopes to do just that.





*Gail Straub, cofounder and executive director of the Empowerment Institute, is one of the world's leading authorities on women's empowerment. She codirects the Empowerment Institute's School for Transformative Social Change, which empowers change agents from around the world to design and implement cutting-edge social innovations. As part of this focus, she cofounded IMAGINE: A Global Initiative for the Empowerment of Women to help women heal from violence, build strong lives, and contribute to their community. IMAGINE initiatives are under way throughout Afghanistan, Africa, India, and the Middle East, where the work has empowered hundreds of thousands of people. Gail has been a consultant to many organizations furthering women's empowerment including the Chinese Women's Federation, Women for Women International, World Pulse, and the Omega Women's Leadership Center.*

*Gail is the author of six books. With her husband David Gershon she coauthored the best-selling Empowerment: The Art of Creating Your Life As You Want It, translated into 14 languages. Garnering multiple awards, her other books include the critically acclaimed The Rhythm of Compassion, the feminist memoir Returning to My Mother's House: Taking Back the Wisdom of the Feminine, and most recently The Ashokan Way, a love letter to her home in the Hudson River Valley. She is also a contributor to the anthology Enlightened Power: How Women Are Transforming the Practice of Leadership.*

### For More Information

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