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**Security and the Pathways of Women's  
Empowerment: Findings from a Thematic  
Synthesis of the Pathways of Women's  
Empowerment Research**

Naomi Hossain

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**pathways**  
of women's  
empowerment



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# Security and the Pathways of Women's Empowerment: Findings from a Thematic Synthesis of the Pathways of Women's Empowerment Research

Naomi Hossain

## Summary

While security and women's empowerment are both prominent development concerns, there has to date been little sustained analysis of the relationship between the two. An unexamined assumption appears to be that insecurity – violence and rights abuses – prevent women from gaining power over their lives through full social, economic or political participation. But how and how much does insecurity structure women's agency? In which domains and contexts are these insecurities prominent? And what are the policy and practical implications of the relationship between women's security and processes of empowerment in contemporary developing countries?

This paper reports on an effort to derive lessons about how security and insecurity shape processes of women's empowerment in developing countries through a thematic synthesis of a collection of research outputs from a five-year programme of research on the Pathways of Women's Empowerment. The programme covered four broad thematic areas: voice (political mobilisation), paid work, body (or changing narratives of sexuality) and concepts of empowerment. Some 115 outputs, including both conceptual and empirical work, were included in the review. The synthesis is not a systematic review (it did not review work outside the Pathways collection nor select papers according to quality or other criteria) but drew on thematic synthesis methodologies as used in the systematic reviews of qualitative data.

The Pathways research was not focused on the issue of security, as the research consortium members had early on concluded that a focus on violence lent itself to victim narratives, which were inconsistent with its feminist approach to women's agency and power. However, as the research proceeded, security and insecurity issues recurred as issues, and the present synthesis was designed to extract interpretive and empirical findings about how security and insecurity shape processes of empowerment. The findings of the synthesis were ultimately grouped into three categories: findings about 1) how security features within the meaning and conceptualisation of empowerment in this collection, covering the issue of victim narratives in conceptions of empowerment and insecurity and concepts of agency in which security is constitutive; 2) the different sources and forms taken by insecurity in the Pathways research contexts, including armed conflict and authoritarian rule, sanctioned forms of violence or insecurity, cultural constructions of gender and sexuality, and 'everyday' forms, including harassment, domestic violence, and fear; 3) responses to insecurity within the processes of empowerment, including opportunities for change in post-conflict and military regimes; violence as a locus for women's mobilisation; and more individualised responses that enable women to negotiate and resist insecurity.

The paper arrives at two broad conclusions and three implications for policy and practice about how insecurity features on the pathways of women's empowerment:

- **Insecurity cross-cuts the pathways of women's empowerment in developing countries.** Insecurity in a range of forms, levels, and degrees of severity and varying across place and time indelibly shape the processes of women's empowerment. Yet this does not mean that violence and rights abuses are absolute obstacles or that

women cower before such threats: instead, it is a reminder of the core basic features of context, structure and power relations within which women's lives are lived. Specifically, it is a reminder that empowerment is irreducibly multidimensional, and does not take place in economic and social settings which are insulated from conflict, domination, and the exercise of other forms of power. Some of the insecurities that shape empowerment are subtle and often ignored forms such as sexual harassment, gendered and sexuality norms, and control of women's mobility.

- **It is in opposing and resisting insecurity that some of the most powerful instances of women's individual and collective agency are found.** While women's agency is shaped and constrained by belligerence and fear and by unlawful and sanctioned abuses of their rights, women (people) also become agents through such experiences. The Pathways collection highlights the individual resistance and collective contestation that violence and abuses have evoked, signalling these struggles as important political apprenticeships for the women's movement in many developing countries. Instead of these structural insecurities, fears, aggression and abuses preventing women's empowerment, it is often precisely the abrogation of 'entry-level rights' to bodily integrity that triggers empowering forms of mobilisation, and around which women's political agency and organisation is built.

#### *Policy and practice implications*

- 'Securitising' women's empowerment: More effective policymaking and interventions around women's and girls' empowerment should be attuned to how the sources of insecurity in the particular context shape women's prospects for personal, social, political and economic empowerment. This is partly a matter of being better equipped to operationalise the multi-dimensional nature of women's empowerment within interventions. Approaches to gender in relation to security, fragility and peace-building could also be sensitive both to how insecurity constrains women's economic, social and political power, and to the opportunities for them to gain power that may arise in post-conflict societies where norms and policies sometimes become more open to favourable shifts in power.
- Measuring empowerment. If processes of women's empowerment are cross-cut by violence and abuses and galvanised by efforts to negotiate and resist them, efforts to accurately track or measure empowerment should take this into account. This has implications for development results measurement, for instance to understand better how violence and empowerment interact along the pathways of change, to ensure indicators are fit for purpose. For example, gains in women's empowerment are not always matched by decreases in the prevalence of violence against women: a better indicator of women's empowerment may be a measure of the extent to which women can resist, report or mobilise against violence, rather than of its prevalence.
- Investing in empowering responses to insecurity. The focus on resistance and mobilisation against violence and abuses demonstrated the scope for responses to insecurity that individually and collectively empower, and which institutionalise official accountability towards women's concerns. This suggests investment in the police and justice sectors (formal and non-formal) could successfully integrate a women's empowerment approach, not by burdening women with uncompensated participation in accountability activities but focusing on the provision of security in sectors that matter to women's empowerment: safety at work (e.g. in petty trading, vending, domestic or sex work); tackling sexual harassment in public spaces and institutions (e.g., schools and colleges, government offices); and protecting women's rights to participate in politics without fear of violence.

**Keywords:** insecurity, security, women's empowerment, violence, agency

**Naomi Hossain** is a Research Fellow in the Participation, Power and Social Change team at the Institute of Development Studies, currently based in Indonesia. She is a political sociologist specialising in the politics of poverty and pro-poor public services. Key areas of interest over nearly two decades of development research have included elite perceptions of poverty and the politics of public service provision, and more recently informal accountability and unruly politics, crime and insecurity, and the social impacts of global economic crises.

Author contact: [N.Hossain@ids.ac.uk](mailto:N.Hossain@ids.ac.uk)

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# Introduction

## Background

While security and women's empowerment are both prominent concerns of international development policy, there has to date been little sustained analysis of the relationship between the two. An unexamined assumption appears to be that insecurity – violence and rights abuses affecting women – constitutes an obstacle to empowerment that impede women's capacities for political participation or economic activity, or that as victims of violence and rights abuses, women's full human capacities remain unrealised. But to what extent and through which channels does insecurity structure women's agency? What forms of insecurity actively constrain or reverse processes of gaining power? In which domains and contexts are these most prominent? How well do we understand the lived experience of violence and rights abuses? And what are the policy and practical implications of the relationship between women's security and processes of empowerment in contemporary developing countries?

This paper sets out to address these questions. It does so by examining how security concerns ranging from full-scale national conflict to everyday domestic violence shape pathways of women's empowerment in a diverse range of country contexts, and in relation to a) the conceptualisation of and mobilisation around empowerment, b) bodily integrity and sexuality, c) voice and political participation, and d) paid work and other economic activity. It is the product of a thematic synthesis of the research outputs from the Pathways of Women's Empowerment Research Programme Consortium (Pathways). It is a selective synthesis, in that it focuses on how a particular set of concerns features in the empirical evidence and analysis, rather than a more comprehensive synthesis of the full range of findings.

This paper is a unique contribution to the evidence base for two reasons. First, it synthesises findings from a large body of current, original, multi-country and inter-disciplinary research designed to understand processes through which women are gaining power in developing countries. Second, the body of work on which it draws explicitly eschews a view of women as victims, and gives prominence instead to their agency, both collective and individual. This intellectual and political position on women's agency is part of the reason that the research is organised around documenting positive pathways of change rather than the impediments (such as insecurity) women face.

While the Pathways programme was deliberately focused on positive pathways of change, by the time of the mid-term review, it was clear that across the body of research, issues of security were emerging as aspects of women's lives that interact closely with their political, economic and personal strategies for advancement. This thematic synthesis was intended to gather lessons about the relationship between security and empowerment arising from this work. The aim of this review was not merely to provide another catalogue of the harms done to women or even to trace their effects on empowerment processes, but to strengthen understanding of how women resist and mobilise against and around security issues; how empowerment in economic, social, sexual and political domains of women's lives shape such efforts and strategies; and how resistance and mobilising interact with underlying processes of social change and public action.



## **Understanding security in relation to empowerment**

The focus on security – or more accurately of insecurity - as experienced by women arises because it represents an extreme, concentrated manifestation of unequal power with the potential to highlight some of the most acute practices of oppression and obstacles to women's empowerment. The concept of 'security' being used here is that of a narrow version of the standard conceptions of 'human security' which connect freedom from fear (or violence) with freedom from want (or poverty) (see review in Alkire 2003). The present focus is on a variety of human security in its focus on individuals, non-military and non-state domains of insecurity, and with a still-emerging gendered conception of human security in which security must be linked to empowerment of the individual: 'victimization and agency are seen as two parts of a reality that should be addressed together rather than as opposites, as is usually the case' (Basch, cited in Hoogensen and Stuvøy 2006: 211).

In practice, this means a focus on the legal and institutional regimes that shape body integrity and human (or women's) agency and so includes all forms of violence, including threats of violence, state-sanctioned or lawful (or structural) violence, and unlawful behaviour that violate women's rights or limit or constrain women's agency, collectively and individually. In the interests of focus in a large and complex collection of material, the present synthesis paper does not include poverty or economic or food or other forms of material insecurities except as these are explicitly connected to violence or unlawful behaviour.

Insecurity as analysed here thus represents the risk of domination with impunity, manifested through violence or the threat of violence and the systemic abrogation of economic, civil and political rights. Insecurity can be a fact of women's lives at different levels and extremes, ranging from structural forms of insecurity such as conflict and war, post-conflict violence, and authoritarianism, to everyday forms of insecurity such as social tolerance of violence against women and sexual and gender based violence. Gender-biases in legal and judicial systems can mean that violent and unlawful acts against women's person or property take place with impunity and are endemic. And socio-cultural norms of sexual purity and appropriate women's behaviour are often underpinned by insecurity, with in some contexts the threat – or hint - of sexual transgression a serious reputational risk.

## **Organisation of the review**

The following section briefly discusses the methods used to organise and synthesise the material. Section 2 groups the findings into three: concepts and meanings, sources of insecurity on the pathways of empowerment, and empowering responses to insecurity. Section 2.1 explores how security features within the meaning and conceptualisation of empowerment in this collection, and covers the issue of victim narratives in discussion of violence against women, and concepts of agency in which security is constitutive. Section 2.2 discusses the different sources and forms taken by insecurity in the Pathways research contexts. These include armed conflict and authoritarian rule, sanctioned forms of violence or insecurity, cultural constructions of gender and sexuality, and 'everyday' forms, including harassment, domestic violence, and fear. Section 2.3 addresses responses to insecurity that feature in women's routes to power, including the opportunities for change that sometimes open up in post-conflict of military regimes; violence as a locus for women's mobilisation, and the more individualised responses that enable women to negotiate and resist insecurity. Section 3 concludes with some thoughts on the implications of the findings for policy and practice in relation to gender and security and women's empowerment.

# 1 Methods and approach

The purpose of the review was to distil learning about how security affects women's empowerment across a large body of diverse research and policy engagement work, partly in order to make it more digestible and useable for policymakers and practitioners. The approach taken recognises the need to synthesise a wide and varied set of findings for this audience, while at the same time 'preserving and respecting its essential context and complexity (Thomas and Harden 2008: 3). The methods adopted here thus aimed to introduce some of the advantages of synthetic review and meta-ethnography methodologies used in qualitative systematic reviews (see Barnett-Page and Thomas 2009 for a review of the applicability of different methodologies). However, it was also important to retain the emphasis on setting findings within their context that is valued within Pathways. It thus avoided trying to impose a logic or set of research questions about security that the Pathways work had not initially set out to explore, and instead worked on locating 'security' issues within the broad themes and questions the work had in fact set out to address. It also aimed to avoid de-contextualising the findings in ways that would imply universal application, in recognition of the context-specificity of pathways of women's empowerment (Kabeer 1999).

The approach drew on the methodology detailed by Thomas and Harden (2008) for the synthesis of qualitative research but is not a systematic review, as it involves a pre-selected collection of literature, which was not subject to quality or other assessment. Of 142 documents, some 115 were included in the review on the basis that they included some reference (however small) to 'security'.

As noted above, 'security' issues were taken to refer to:

- all aspects of violence and violent conflict, from full-scale war to domestic violence, that affect women's lives and agency
- theft and other abrogation of women's property and resource rights involving unlawful activity and/or force
- the effects of socio-cultural institutions and norms underpinned by perceived threats to women's bodily integrity (or moral purity) that restrict women's agency (e.g. norms of seclusion and exclusion from the public sphere)
- legal and institutional norms that routinely push women into risky or illegal responses (e.g. lack of a legal right to safe abortion).

An initial level of coding categorised the collection work into the four thematic groups into which Pathways organises its research: concepts, body (or changing narratives of sexuality), voice and work. These were inputted into the Eppi Reviewer software for further coding and data management, to enable the translation of concepts and ordering of material. After an initial scan of the literature, the analysis proceeded by applying a set of descriptive codes to the material according to its main thematic relevance. These are summarised in the Table 1.1 below.

**Table 1.1 Descriptive coding used for thematic synthesis**

Concepts	Body	Voice	Work
Forms and sources of insecurity: Locations, sources and types of insecurity are identified and/or discussed	Forms and sources of insecurity: locations, sources and types of insecurity are identified and/or discussed	Forms, sources and meanings of insecurity: Forms and sources of insecurity in this work on voice. Particular emphasis on the relationship between insecurity, resistance and voice. Also concepts and meanings	Forms and sources of insecurity
Actors and institutions that reinforce or address security: the paper contains discussion of how security features in the discourses of different actors and institutions	The law and security services: how the law and judiciary and security services shape women's security  Other actors and institutions that reinforce security concerns: economic and social institutions and practices and groups that mediate women's security	Women's security as a political issue: Discusses how women's insecurity is treated as a political issue, the connection between politics and insecurity for women, and social mobilisation around insecurity	Actors and institutions: the main actors and institutions that are important in mediating women's security in their paid work
	Personal violence and constrained agency: Does the form or nature of personal violence or physical threats constrain women's agency?	Security and pathways of political empowerment: Do security concerns affect women's capacities for political participation and leadership?	Paid work and security: how does paid work affect women's security?
	Resistance and insecurity: Resisting insecurity as an empowering experience; women's strategies for addressing security		Resistance and mobilising: Efforts to resist and mobilise around women's security, with a focus on security in relation to their economic lives.

An additional level of coding was then undertaken for some sections of text, including that under the 'forms and sources' and 'actors and institutions' and 'legal and security institutions' headings. Child codes for these categories were developed on the basis of reading the text under the parent codes, and included:

- Forms and sources: armed conflict, authoritarian rule, 'everyday' forms of violence (e.g., sexual harassment, domestic violence, abuse), sanctioned and/or legal forms of rights abuses or structural violence (e.g., laws restricting abortion, '*urfi*' and other forms of forced or unequal marriage, customary conflict resolution practices such as rapist marriage; dowry), socio-cultural norms that restrict women's agency on grounds of perceived insecurity threats, trauma and psychological harm from chronic or acute insecurity, and occupational safety from violence, abuse and rights abrogation.
- Actors and institutions (that feature both as contributing to and tackling women's security concerns): armed combatants, state laws and actors, employers and economic actors, religious institutions and actors, authoritarian regimes, international organisations and the international community, media, popular culture, technology, family and kin, masculinities, norms that limit women's agency (e.g. *purdah*, seclusion, segregation, the construction of public spheres as masculine spaces), gender stereotypes and socio-cultural norms about femininity; heteronormativity.

Finally, relevant extracts from the outputs were reviewed and given analytical codes manually. This final set of codes provides the basis for the analysis used in the findings section, which follows, and evolved out of a reasonably lengthy process of reviewing and revisiting the texts.

## 2 Findings

The findings have been organised under three headings. The first covers the main conceptual and theoretical findings about what security means for women's empowerment, and sets out findings relating to how the fear or threat of violence or rights abuses (insecurity, in short) feature in how empowerment is conceptualised and what it means. This section focuses on how, whether and to what extent insecurity is constitutive of women's agency or capacities for purposive action, and what that therefore means for their empowerment. This section includes a focus on what the psychological dimensions of insecurity mean for women's efforts to gain power over their own lives. It then discusses the related idea that the struggle for security – for control over one's body and against violence or rights abuses – is itself integral to processes of women's empowerment, and cannot meaningfully be separated from it.

These findings about how security features in the meaning of empowerment are elaborated and illustrated by the two sets of empirical findings. The first of the empirical findings addresses the sources of insecurity and security that appear to matter to women in their struggles for empowerment. This looks at the forms that insecurity takes and at the actors and institutions that contribute to security and insecurity. This is not an exhaustive catalogue of all the sources and forms of insecurity which women in these developing country contexts experience, but an analysis of the kinds of insecurity and sources of safety that emerge as shaping key processes of empowerment in relation to bodily integrity, voice and work in these specific settings. The analysis explores findings about what empowerment means under the most acute forms of violent domination such as armed conflict and authoritarian rule and in the context of legal or sanctioned forms of structural insecurity that constrain women's agency or expose them to violence or abuse. This section also explores how new and old cultural and religious institutions – e.g., masculinities, popular culture, revivalist religious ideologies – can contribute to insecurity but can also enable them to negotiate safer and more equitable relationships and to gain power over the sources of violence or abuse. This section also looks at how the everyday sources of insecurity affect the power women can exert over their own bodies and lives, particularly in relation to work, sexuality, and political participation.

The final section looks at how responding to insecurity can be empowering for women. Here we look at the spaces sometimes created in conflict and post-conflict situations for new kinds of political agency for women – as freedom fighters or peace-builders or through political quotas or other forms of affirmative action. They also include a range of emergent sites of resistance and solidarity in the face of insecurity and violence – in popular mass media, the university classroom, positive assertions of women's sexuality, customary dispute resolution, through female friendships, etc. Finally, the findings conclude with some analysis of how violence can become a locus for women's mobilisation and therefore of their political apprenticeship and agency and collective empowerment: this last point provides some empirical illustrations of the earlier conceptual and theoretical point about how processes of women's empowerment are integrally women's struggles against violence and the impunity with which their rights are abused.

## 2.1 Security and the meaning of empowerment

### 2.1.1 *Beyond victimhood: locating security within empowerment*

The Pathways research is attuned to the risk that incorporating security concerns within concepts of empowerment can result in an unrealistic and disabling narrative of victimhood. An emphasis on violence as constitutive of understandings of empowerment can be seen as part of the:

...language of vulnerability and marginalisation that has come to be associated with 'gender' [which] runs the risk of infantilising women, lumping them together with children as the deserving objects of intervention ... Any vestige of a more dignified way of talking about women who are living in poverty falls away. The stereotypical woman that these discourses evoke is always heterosexual, usually either with an abusive or useless husband or a victim of abandonment struggling to survive as a female-headed household. She is portrayed as abject and at the same time as eager to improve herself and her situation if only she could be 'empowered' (Cornwall, Gideon and Wilson 2008: 5).

Because violence and abuses women experience are often related to sexuality, the concern that a focus on insecurity in relation to empowerment will result in a victim narrative of women's sexuality is particularly likely. This is even more problematic because sexuality remains a development taboo:

Talk about putting more women into work and getting more women into politics has become relatively uncontroversial, at least in the domain of secular development policy. But when it comes to sexualities, there is no such ready consensus. There are those for whom sexuality is a private matter, those for whom the only sexuality issues that matter are sexually transmitted infections and sexual violation, and those who advocate women's empowerment at the same time as denying women the rights to exercise choices over their own sexual and reproductive lives. How difficult it remains to articulate a perspective on gender and sexuality that refuses to treat all women as victims, to be protected from male predation. What does it take to shift understandings of female sexuality in ways that recognise - and indeed celebrate the positive and the pleasurable? (Cornwall 2007a: 3).

The conflation of sexuality with sexual violence is counter-productive for women's empowerment:

Discourses of gender and development, HIV/AIDS, and health often focus on protecting women from violence and coerced sex ... Combating violence is indeed hugely important. However, this focus on the negative subsumes women's sexuality under violence and fear in a way that allows no space for exploring their own desires. This emphasis can be disempowering, both on the level of individual relationships and ease with one's own body, and on an organizational level of mobilizing around what women want (Jolly 2010: 227).

Criticism of the victim narrative also includes that 'there has been more interest in aspects of the body that are specifically female than those which are not, but which could be a deep source of disempowerment and distress for women' such as mental health, occupational well-being, non-reproductive health risks and the hazards of migration, urbanization, environmental degradation, pollution and poverty (Sholkamy 2008: 92).

Rather than conceptualising insecurity as an obstacle that impedes women's empowerment by turning them into helpless victims, Pathways researchers view it as the site of struggle itself: it is through the struggle for freedom from violence that power is won. Drawing on Judith Butler, Kuttab argues that in the context of Palestine, acts of resistance to authoritarian rule, oppression or violence may themselves be the source or site of agency. Empowerment is about everyday resistance in this context, 'framed within coping strategies and steadfastness' (2010: 248). In a paper on 'Conceptualising empowerment and the implications for pro poor growth' for the DAC Poverty Network, Eyben *et al* explain social empowerment as:

a process whereby people develop a sense of and capacity for agency – 'individual power within' and 'collective power with others' – to improve the quality of their social relationships and to secure respect, dignity and freedom from violence, leading purposively or otherwise to changes in the institutions and discourses that are keeping them in poverty (Eyben, Kabeer and Cornwall 2008: 8).

The vital distinction here is between a perspective which sees empowerment as a process through which women are freed from violence, and one which sees empowerment as a process through which women secure their own freedom from violence, through both individual and collective power.

While there is concern that the conceptualisation of empowerment around issues of violence may produce victim narratives, there is also recognition that there are pragmatic and tactical payoffs from connecting women's security concerns with an acceptably depoliticised concept of women's empowerment. Several papers reflect on the history of the concept, with some identifying a sequence behind the emergence of violence within the women's empowerment agenda. Part of this history is that a depoliticised concept of women's empowerment, consistent with neoliberal development policies 'has brought a new acceptability, an urgency even, to issues that were once barely countenanced as 'development' issues', such as violence against women (Cornwall and Anyidoho 2010: 145-6). Yet the concept of women's empowerment has often been operationalised to fit a liberal policy agenda and not in ways that would imply substantial shifts in power. For this reason, women's empowerment is often conceptualised in ways that fail to take into account the realities of conflict and structural violence in women's lives; this is true even of post-conflict settings in which violence and security have been fundamental to women's life chances and empowerment prospects, such as 1980s Bangladesh and contemporary Sierra Leone (Nazneen *et al.* 2010, Abdullah and Fofana-Ibrahim 2010).

### **2.1.2 Security as a determinant of women's agency**

Although the Pathways approach explicitly rejected a victim perspective on violence against women, security (or insecurity) nonetheless emerged as a foundational dimension of power and empowerment because of its influence on women's agency. Several of the definitional and conceptual discussions make this point. Cornwall describes women's rights over their bodies as one of two 'entry-level' rights or preconditions for achieving all other rights (no date) (the other is the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives). Reviewing the experience of struggles to legislate against domestic violence in sub-Saharan Africa, Manuh writes that '[v]iolence, including domestic violence, deprives women of their ability to achieve their full potential by threatening their safety, freedom and autonomy' (2007: 4).

Review papers from South Asia all drew direct lines between women's experiences of violence and their agency and power:

Women live in constant threat of violence; are discriminated against and exploited, are denied the right to spatial mobility, right to make informed choices over their bodies and sexuality. Societal control over and regulation of these spaces violates bodily integrity rendering them powerless. Respect for bodily integrity is therefore a prerequisite for women's empowerment in any context (Kanchan, scoping paper for India, no date: 1-2)

Violence against women, domestic violence and rape, female genital mutilation are seen as violations affecting women's health and posing lifelong risks. Fear of violence is as potent a dimension of bodily integrity as violence itself (Mumtaz 2010: 239)

Bodily integrity therefore primarily implies a sound and whole physical self and an atmosphere (physical, social, economic, psychological, political) that helps to promote and protect that self ... The right to live in safety underscores women's right not to be subjected to physical, sexual, or emotional violence inside or outside the home, either by private individuals or by people acting on the part of the state (Mahmud 2006: 3-4).

These explorations of what bodily integrity means to women in South Asian contexts of widespread and routine violence and fear of violence suggest a serious - in some cases complete - obstacle to empowerment for many women, under usual (i.e., not 'conflict') circumstances. Yet the obstacle to empowerment posed by insecurity is rendered less tangible by the idea of the force of an 'atmosphere' or 'fear of violence', variants of which are in all three extracts above. For Mumtaz, the generalised likelihood of such violence 'is as potent' a threat as the facts of violence, while Mahmud argues that bodily integrity requires not only physical wholeness but also a set of physical, social, economic, psychological and political conditions - an 'atmosphere' - that helps to promote and protect the self. This suggests that insecurity impinges on women's agency not only as tangible physical violence, but also as a latent threat or an environment that sanctions violence and abuses of women's rights. This important point is reinforced forcefully by other parts of this body of work, which assert that these effects arise both from the facts of and *the threat* of personal violence and rights abuses: women do not need to experience harassment or violence for their capacities to imagine or act to be shaped by the realistic risk of such experiences.

There are two points that need to be made about threats to women's insecurity in relation to their agency and power. The first is relevant from a policy and practice perspective: an atmosphere or threat of violence may be a potent deterrent against empowerment, but it may not be obvious nor easily measurable. The second relates to the psychological effects on agency and power: such fears can limit what people can even imagine as alternatives. As Goetz and Musembi put it:

If women are locked into relations of dependency from which they have no realistic exit option, if they are also oppressed by violence, exploitation and economic marginalisation, how reliable are their expressed preferences if they have no alternatives ... ? (2008: 14)

At the same time, women's capacities to act evidently do not depend on the absence or eradication of the insecurities they face. Instead, their agency is itself formed through those experiences. Drawing on Foucault and Saba Mahmood to conceptualise how changing narratives of sexuality are shaping women's power, Pereira explains that:

[M]odes of agency are not the residual aspects of an undominated self that existed before the operations of power but are themselves produced through those very power relations ... the processes and conditions that undergird a subject's subordination are also the route to her becoming a self-conscious agent (2008: 21-22).

Women's agency is not the capacity to act of violence-free 'undominated selves', but of people whose lived experiences, relationships and imaginaries are imbued with power relations, including the risk or reality of violence or abuse.

In settings of acute conflict, women's security is more plainly central to the meaning of empowerment:

When the Sierra Leone civil war was declared over in January 2002, the concept of women's empowerment was firmly entrenched in development discourse and practice. The aftermath of the brutalities of rape, gang rape, sexual slavery, forced pregnancy, abduction, among other atrocities that women and children, especially girls, were subjected to during Sierra Leone's eleven years civil war was firmly on the post-war agenda. There was a groundswell of protest from women's NGOs and activists demanding the protection and promotion of women's rights as part of peace negotiations, post-conflict reconstruction and peace consolidation processes. (Abdullah and Fofana-Ibrahim 2010: 259)

In conflict settings, insecurity can be constitutive of the substance and meaning of women's choices and power. In her study of unmarried women in Palestine, Johnson asks: 'How do young unmarried women negotiate boundaries and understand and enact choice in the context of a society experiencing prolonged insecure and warlike conditions, political crisis and social fragmentation and where the high number of unmarried women can be an increasing locus of moral panic?' (2010: 106). Johnson finds that the boundaries between physical bodies and 'political bodies' is blurred during conflict, so that women's bodily integrity or physical agency is imbued with a specific content and meaning in this conflict context (2009). Azim writes similarly of the centrality of women's bodies to conflict, noting that in the Afghan context, '[t]he conflict seems to be over the body of the woman' (Azim 2006: 3):

What is interesting is that the image of the woman remains central in all these debates – can she go to school, can she walk without a veil and so forth. Whole societies are judged according to the status of their women. It is this centrality of the image of the woman that needs more analysis and probing, to understand what this means actually in the lives of women.

Experiences of conflict tend to destabilise social norms and reconfigure gender relations. In some contexts this has resulted in a more receptive discursive space for women's empowerment. Rwanda witnessed a 'paradigm shift' as an 'outcome of the changing socioeconomic roles of women after the genocide' (Kantengwa 2010: 71). In Sierra Leone, war time atrocities against women and girls formed the background to the goals of women's empowerment within national development in the reconstruction period (Abdullah and Fofana-Ibrahim 2010; Abdullah, Fofana-Ibrahim and King 2010).

## **2.2 Sources of security/insecurity along the pathways of empowerment**

A wide range of types of insecurity have direct effects on women's lives in the societies included in the Pathways body of research. At one end of the spectrum of intensity are regional conflicts and national wars, associated with the presence of armed combatants, extreme socio-political disruption, rape and torture, displacement and economic hardship, as well as high levels of property and violent crime, organised and sporadic. At the other end are the more diffuse and indirect effects of security on women's empowerment through socio-cultural institutions that 'protect' women against perceived threats of insecurity, particularly against sexual violence and associated reputational threats, chiefly by restricting their mobility or interactions in the public sphere. In between these extremes of intensity and



direct effects are various forms of domestic and sexual violence, the norms and legal structures that underpin these and permit their enactment with effective impunity and social acceptance, and legal and institutional arrangements that systematically or routinely violate women's rights, again with effective impunity.

### **2.2.1 Armed conflict and authoritarian rule**

Armed conflict and war results in the most serious forms of violence against women, as in this account of women's and girls' experiences of the war in Sierra Leone:

The violations that women and girls experienced during the war were characterised by the most extraordinary inexplicable acts of violence, leaving many women permanently scarred ... Women and girls were tortured as various objects such as firewood, sticks, and guns were inserted into their private parts. Some women were forced to have sex with other male members of their families such as their sons and wards. There were also a few reports of disembowelment of pregnant women and torture and killing of babies in their mother's presence. Some women and girls had their arms and limbs amputated. Abducted women and girls experienced sexual slavery and forced marriage. An estimated 58 per cent of women suffering sexual violence were repeatedly violated by multiple perpetrators. Furthermore, to instil fear and deter abductees from escaping, the different warring factions often tattooed or marked their victims with knives, blades and other sharp instruments on various parts of their bodies. The abuse of women was indeed a weapon of war and a strategy designed to destroy the norms and values of the society. The violations committed against women and girls continue to have a negative impact on their lives in postwar Sierra Leone. Because of societal sanctions against abortions and lack of access to proper healthcare, a lot of women had to carry unwanted pregnancies and have become single mothers in a postwar society in which life can be unbearably difficult ... Some women suffer permanent or irreparable injury as there has been an increase in sexually transmitted diseases including HIV/AIDS. In effect, widowhood, ostracism and forced pregnancies have led to an increase in female-headed households where families live in very poor conditions. (Abdullah, Fofana-Ibrahim and King 2010: 42-3)

During the Rwanda genocide,

women suffered the most horrible and dehumanising acts. Along with men and children, women were targeted and killed, often after witnessing the brutal killings of their family members (husbands, children, sisters, brothers, parents, friends and other relatives). Rape was used as a weapon of destruction and means of spreading HIV/AIDS to defenceless victims. (Kantengwa 2010: 73)

In Palestine, the Israeli occupation has used sexual violence and the threat of sexual violence as a weapon in a context of social conservatism:

[G]irls and women detained and accused of nationalist activities were sexually assaulted or threatened with such violence, especially during interrogations; secondly, Israeli interrogators frequently threatened sexual violence against daughters, sisters, or wives as a method of extracting information or 'confessions' from male detainees. (Jad 2008: 35)

Despite the high levels of violence perpetrated against women in armed conflict, it is only relatively recently that women's rights activists and feminist legal scholars have successfully argued for war tribunals to recognise 'women's experiences of war – and particularly sexual violence – as a major category of war crime and in some contexts even a genocidal tactic' Goetz and Musembi (2008: 8).

Two points are directly relevant to an understanding of women's empowerment in post-conflict contexts. The first is the symbolic and relational significance of violations of women's bodies as a 'weapon of war and a strategy designed to destroy the norms and values of the society': in war, women's bodies can come to bear a heavy symbolic burden in addition to the physical costs they bear as casualties of conflict. The psychosocial dimensions of these experiences are known to be profound for both women's and men's sense of agency. This means that conflict and post-conflict gender relations are likely to be fractured and fragile, particularly where strategies of destroying social norms and values succeed and social relations are damaged or disrupted. The trauma of gender-based violence in conflict and the damage to the social fabric that follow may make the pathways of women's empowerment more uncertain and challenging; it may also, however, mean that spaces open up for new ways of relating between men and women, and between women and the state. We will look at some of these in more detail in the following section. However, the second point that bears reinforcing is the enduring material effects of gender-based violence in conflict settings. There are clear practical issues here to do with the kinds of support that women may value and benefit from in post-conflict conditions. The lesson for policy and practice is that post-conflict settings typically mean vast practical challenges and unstable prospects for women to gain power, but also new opportunities for them to do so.

War also affects women's power over the everyday aspects of life. War makes many livelihoods less secure, and increased pressure on economic security can push women into unsafe and illegal occupations. In Sierra Leone, war zones became a space in which women could engage in looting and other lucrative but dangerous and illegal economic activities, in a context in which 'safe' spaces such as refugee camps offered limited options (Abdullah, Fofana-Ibrahim and King 2010). In Palestine, Israeli controls on Palestinian mobility reinforce societal restrictions on women's mobility, particularly those of young unmarried women (Johnson 2010). In Bangladesh, the authoritarian response to the conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts has been implicated in rape and sexual harassment of women from ethnic minority groups (Mohsin 2010). Mahmud cites research findings that indigenous women have faced harassment and criticism of their behaviour and dress, pushing them to adopt the dominant Bengali Muslim social behaviour and attire, in addition to social relationships that are more dependent on men than customary indigenous forms of matrilineity (2006: 16).

International organisations and international human rights frameworks feature in these accounts of how the sources of insecurity shape women's empowerment. These global dimensions feature primarily but not exclusively as actors engaged in supporting and protecting women's security, or providing standards around which to mobilise. However, Abdullah and Fofana-Ibrahim (2010) note that other than the women's agency UNIFEM, UN agencies had tended to marginalise women in the post-conflict policy process. In Palestine, Kuttub notes that donor support for women's organisations has not been universally experienced as empowering (2010).

### **2.2.2 Sanctioned forms of structural violence or insecurity**

A second category of insecurity encountered on the pathways of empowerment is structural or systemic rights abuses and forms of violence, which are backed by law and/or social sanction. These are somewhat more complex in their forms and in the status of the main actors and institutions involved. Unlike the fairly straightforward negative impact of armed conflict and authoritarian rule on women's power, there is likely to be more ambivalence about institutions backed by religious, cultural and customary practices and laws. They include institutions such as forced, child and 'urfi marriages; customary conflict resolution practices such as honour killings, exchanges of women, or rapist marriages; practices of dowry, which routinely result in violence against women; female excision; violence and

discrimination against sexual minorities; and laws restricting abortion which systematically force women into dangerous - and illegal - responses.

Abdullah *et al.* note that forced marriage of girls to far older men persist in Sierra Leone even after the war, and are rarely challenged (2010: 42; also Fofana-Ibrahim and King 2007). Kadiatu, who was 16 when forced to marry a man of 50 gave the following account of her marriage:

My husband made me have a child every year. We had a total of six – 2 boys 4 girls. There is virtually no space between my children. I was often breastfeeding one baby and pregnant with another. He was always demanding sex. My husband was very jealous. Because he was much older than me, he always felt that I would be interested in younger men. Whenever he saw me talking to a man he would beat me up. He never wanted me to make friends or to trade. The only decisions I was allowed to make were about cooking and buying household stuff. He never wanted anything good for me. Sometimes I want to believe that he treated me badly because I had no formal education. I lost my husband when I was 37 and I was left with six children and no help from relatives and friends... To make matters worse I had no formal education or skills to take care of my children. (Fofana-Ibrahim and King 2007: 6)

Al-Sharmani notes that in Egypt, widowed women can be forced into unregistered or *urfi* marriages in which they lack legal rights to financial support from their second husbands, so that they keep the pensions of their first husbands (2010). In Palestine, an area not known for the prevalence of informal marriage, women noted the rise of *zawaj urfi* or unregistered marriage without a formal contract as a new danger, one which they saw as more serious than the physical peril faced as a result of the occupation (Johnson 2010: 111). *Urfi* marriages are illegal under *sharia* law, and women interviewed by Johnson gave accounts of women committing suicide as a result of the situation in which these unregistered marriages placed them. The example from Palestine of this new form of marriage, and indications from Sierra Leone that attitudes towards female excision are shifting (Fofana-Ibrahim and King 2007) underline the critical point that socially-sanctioned forms of structural violence and rights abuses against women may be neither customary (in the sense of deeply-rooted in cultural history and tradition) nor static. The policy and practice implications of this include the need for research and testimony that can counter claims of custom or cultural tradition where these are used to justify practices that entrench structural violence against women.

Cornwall, Standing and Lynch (2008) explain why the lack of access to safe abortion constitutes a legal sanction of women's insecurity:

We know that whether or not abortion is permitted or prohibited by law, women will seek abortion services and obtain abortions. They will seek them because of their social, economic, health or other personal circumstances. They will seek them because they have experienced rape and sexual assault. If safe services are not available, they will turn to unsafe ones. Even in countries with the most punitive of laws, there are flourishing markets in providers who offer abortion services; this leaves poorer women more vulnerable to impairment, illness through infection and death than middle-class women who are able to pay for safer options. For the poorest women, and for young women with no money and no access to information about what services might be available, the only option is self-abortion, despite the steep risks it involves. Women stand a massively higher risk of dying as a result of pregnancy in countries with restrictive abortion laws than in countries where safe services are legal and available. (Cornwall *et al.* 2008: 2)

Sardenberg and Costa describe the situation in Brazil, where abortion has been legal only when pregnancy is the result of rape or when pregnancy endangers the life of the mother.

They estimate that between 750,000 and 1,000,000 clandestine abortions are performed in Brazil annually, and nearly 250,000 women are admitted into public hospitals as a result of abortion-related complications; nearly 10 per cent of these die as a result, and almost 20 per cent are left with damage to their reproductive organs. They note that these women are mainly black and poor, as other women can afford the costly services of safe illegal clinics (2009).

One of the forms that pervasive insecurity threats (or perceived or constructed threats) take is socio-cultural norms that dictate women's behaviour, particularly their mobility and relationships. The best example of this is *purdah* or the practice of seclusion or segregation, as found mainly in Muslim Asia and the Arab world. In the Pathways work, this relates mainly to the 'strongly corporate forms of patriarchy' in the belt of countries from the Middle East and North Africa and the northern plains of the South Asian subcontinent, including Pakistan and Bangladesh (Kabeer 2008: 8). Elements of restrictions on women's movements, dress and general behaviour are also found in other contexts.

The significance of socio-cultural institutions such as *purdah* in cementing the link between women's security and their prospects for empowerment is highlighted in several analyses. In Pakistan, Khan notes that:

The relationship between women's work and the political environment, and women's work and the sexual politics of Pakistani society is also very close. As the policy environment deteriorated during the 1980s and women were discouraged from participating in the public sphere there was a lack of political commitment ... to implement the changes required to mainstream women within the development process and certainly recognize their economic productivity. The issues discussed earlier in this paper regarding *purdah*, have possibly gained in stature in policy-making circles over the last decades politically due to the ideologies of the government. While politically the government has been promoting segregation, particularly under General Zia ul-Haq, it is understandable that it would defer to culture and traditions regarding *purdah* as an explanation for women's inability to take greater part in employment outside the home and access social sector services or have greater political participation. And the sexual violence that has been the darker side of social norms, the threat that has helped to keep women obedient and indoors, has also grown in visibility as this political culture has taken over society. (2006: 21-22)

In Egypt, violence and threats of violence against prospective women politicians has effectively deterred all but those with strong political connections from participation. One woman candidate explained why in her view she lost the 2000 election:

I was exposed to a lot of violence: they brought the police on horses and with police dogs and the worst [thing] was they brought the women from prison with microphones and they were swearing at the women going into the voting office and harassing them. They prevented my husband from going into the electoral voting booth ... and they tried to stop me and I said I will go inside in spite of you because I am one of the nominees and one of the policemen attacked me with a stick, breaking my finger. (Tadros 2010b: 94)

Violence and harassment of women politicians and candidates were also noted as deterrents for women's political participation in Bangladesh (Nazneen and Tasneem 2010) and Pakistan (Khattak 2010).

There is little evidence from this body of work that religious organisations have been prominent supporters of women's rights to protection against security in their struggles for empowerment. By contrast, Batliwala (2007) notes a 'disturbing trend' for ideas about

women's empowerment to become co-opted into the ideological frameworks of fundamentalist Hinduism, even while these 'remain deeply hostile to the questioning of the disempowerment and subjugation of millions of women with the spread of particular regional and upper-caste Hindu practices such as dowry, female foeticide through sex-selective abortions' (2007: 3). In Uganda in 2005, hundreds of hijab-wearing women marched against proposed legislation on domestic relations on grounds that it was a 'coup against family decency' (Manuh 2007). In Pakistan, a 2006 bill against domestic violence was opposed by the Minister of Parliamentary Affairs as un-Islamic and because Islam gives men the right to beat their wives (Mumtaz 2010). Similar efforts to mobilise against progressive national women's legislation in Bangladesh were led by groups declaring common cause with the religious right (Huq 2009). In Nicaragua, coalitions between church organisations and political parties have mobilised to restrict abortion, even at the risk to women's lives (Bradshaw 2008), and faith-based institutional resistance to safe abortion is by no means restricted to Nicaragua. However, based on her work with urban Muslim women in Bangladesh, Huq argues the need to avoid simple correlations and assumptions that religious expressions cannot be empowering for women:

we need to look at different situations and assess whether these correlations are true for every case, and the particular cultural factors and power structures that place intolerance, violence and conservative sexuality in the same box. Much probing and analytical thinking needs to take place before we discredit the appreciation for and appropriation of certain religious forms based on the assumption that they automatically accompany intolerance and violence. (2010: 104)

### **2.2.3 Cultural constructions of gender and sexuality**

Cultural and social constructions of masculinity and femininity are also implicated as among the sources of insecurity that affect women's power over their lives. Social constructions of masculinity feature in examples of efforts to protect male privilege against women's legal empowerment. Mumtaz notes that in Pakistan:

Social conditioning with reference to women is so strong that legislators from across the political parties united to oppose the government's "honour killing" Bill 2005 epitomising the mindset regarding women's lives and male control over them. Seeking to outlaw adjudication from jirgas and panchayats on murders in the name of honour the Bill got watered down by making it possible for the murderer to get pardoned by the family of the killed woman. Given that most of the so called "honour killings" are by family members, pardon from the heirs of the dead woman is easy. (Mumtaz 2010: 242)

Manuh notes that in Kenya a sexual-offences bill that sought harsher penalties for perpetrators of sexual violence 'became mired in controversy when a legislator (male, as were 204 of the 222 expected to vote on the bill) alleged that some provisions would criminalise men's advances towards women' (2007).

One of the innovations of the Pathways work has been its inclusion of concerns about masculinities in discussions of empowerment and security. This has led to some criticism of the 'overwhelming focus on sexual health and violence' within masculinity studies (Esplen 2008), and of the pathologisation of men as 'the main oppressor of wives and daughters' (Vera-Sanso 2008: 53). A conference on 'Politicising Masculinities' included discussion of human rights work to address the 'harmful links between militarism and masculinity' and oppressive cultures of violence within police forces (Esplen and Greig 2008: 44). The need to rethink men and masculinity in relation to violence and women's empowerment is urgent but difficult:

Men are so pervasively cast as the problem and patriarchal prerogative is so naturalised in gender discourse as a benefit that accrues to all men that there is barely space to raise let alone answer this question ... Greig urges us to look beyond simplistic narratives of masculinity and into the complex constraints of heteronormative masculinity. He calls for an approach that asks fundamental questions about autonomy and accountability, and that does not shy away from highlighting the role heterosexual men have to play in 'the social and sexual revolution that will secure sexual rights not simply for themselves, but for all'. (Cornwall and Jolly 2006: 8)

Strategies for addressing masculinity and its connections to violence (including men's exposure to violence) include incorporating such concerns within conditional cash transfer programmes, with a specific focus on Mexico and Latin America:

Among the additional issues that need attention is first that of the increasing problem of violence, in both the public and private spheres, which particularly afflicts women and children (and in different ways, young men) in many parts of Mexico and other parts of Latin America. Inequality combined with poverty, the drugs trade and irregular employment is the lethal mix that feeds social desolidarisation, crime and violence. Recognising the importance of safety – whether in the public sphere (going to schools, clinics, meetings, collecting stipends) or in the private realm of the household, indicates that violence should be included as part of the behaviour-changing element of programme design. If violence against women and children is to be tackled in the domestic unit, and other forms of 'masculine' violence outside it, relations of power and authority and cultures of masculinity and femininity, along with the normative conducts associated with them, need effective and creative policy responses. This implies that men and boys need to be integrated into the work of the programme and fathers in particular should cease to be treated as marginal figures or hopeless cases. (Molyneux no date: 60-1)

Some of the Pathways research identifies ways in which social constructions of both femininity and masculinity are shaped by and interact with popular culture and mass media, including through new ICTs such as mobile phones and satellite television. Global popular culture and technologies are also implicated in new sources of threats to women and girls. Falsified pornographic images of women being distributed via mobile phone and television images of permissive social mores have been seen as threats to women in Palestine (Johnson 2009). For women and girls, constructions of the 'good woman' can constrain their agency by requiring of them that they limit their mobility to avoid exposing themselves to sexual harassment or violence, or else relinquish social and state protection should they fail to conform. Clear examples of the image of the 'good woman', often linked to popular cultural representations and typically restrictive of women's agency are found in Palestine (Johnson 2009), Bangladesh (Priyadarshini and Rahim 2009), and Ghana (Ampofo, Asiedu and Bourgeois 2009).

For transgender people in Peru, violence from police and other forms of discrimination are linked to the imposition of a rigid gender dichotomy on what had been more fluid understandings of gender (Cornwall and Jolly 2006). In India, Kanchan notes reports of lesbian couples committing suicide as a 'result of society's attempt to restrict women's choices and control their lives and sexuality' (no date: 18). The real threat posed by the social construction of women's sexuality was echoed in reports from South Africa of the murder of a lesbian couple (AWID Forum 2008: 7; see also Esplen and Greig 2008). As is discussed below, women have developed behavioural and cognitive responses for coping with and avoiding constraints on their agency that result from social constructions of good womanhood (etc) (Huq 2009; Mahmud *et al.* 2009); in others they have adopted strategies for resisting and reshaping gender norms to widen the space for their agency and identities (see below).

## **2.2.4 Everyday forms of insecurity**

By far the most widespread form of insecurity that women face is 'everyday' forms of violence. These were identified in all contexts covered by the research. They include domestic violence, sexual and other forms of harassment, and physical or verbal abuse. The routine and widespread nature of domestic violence and other forms of sexual harassment can lead to their underestimation as an impediment to women's empowerment. Yet the extent of the problem and the level of impunity with which it occurs are strikingly self-evident deterrents to women's struggles to gain power.

In some contexts, domestic violence is associated with the stresses of poverty under conditions of structural adjustment (Bedford 2008) or poverty and alcohol or drug abuse (Sardenberg and Costa 2009; Khan 2010). Domestic violence is not only perpetrated by men on women, however: the Egyptian Demographic and Health Survey in the late 1990s found high levels of violence by men and women against each other and their children (Sholkamy 2009). Sholkamy also cites a 2007 survey of 2,372 ever-married women in Egypt, which found that 25 per cent of respondents reported having been beaten since their marriage, by their husband in 93 per cent of cases. An additional 8 per cent reported emotional violence such as threats of divorce and of physical violence.

Kabeer cites evidence that 14,000 Russian women are murdered by their partners each year, compared to the 17,000 fatalities from the 10 year Afghanistan war (2007). A survey undertaken as part of the Pathways programme in Ghana work confirmed other evidence about the extent of the problem. Between 20 and 30 per cent of respondents in a survey of 600 adult women had experienced emotional violence, including being prevented from attending meetings, threats of physical abuse and insults, while another 20 per cent had experienced physical violence, and some 13 per cent had been subjected to forced sex by their partners (Darkwah and Tsikata 2009: 37).

Abdullah *et al.* note that before the war in Sierra Leone, domestic violence was enacted with impunity, being so prevalent that the phrase was rarely used. 'Physical chastisement' of wives by husbands was widely approved, and even educated women rarely reported acts of violence (2010). Gonçalves (2009) notes that violence against domestic workers in Brazil was similarly widely accepted:

In the past we did not dare to classify the subject as being sexual abuse as today it is considered. It was only domestic-sexual violence. It was a kind of violence that forced black women to remember little had changed regarding the patterns of behaviour established between slave owners and their slaves, between the 'casa grande' and the 'senzala'. (2009: 65)

Sexual harassment is another deterrent to girls' and women's pathways of empowerment. Evidence from around the world highlights how sexual harassment discourages girls and women from attending school, engaging in politics, taking up paid work (Cornwall 2007b; Johnson 2009; Wilson 2008; Khan 2006; Mohsin 2010). This includes in the more regulated formal sectors, and even within public sector employment in Bangladesh (Sultan 2006). Sultan refers to evidence that in Bangladesh, although women have not frontally protested or dealt with harassment, they have learned to cope in ways that limit its impact on their lives:

Women are learning to cope with vulnerability while commuting and have gained self-confidence. Most of them now conform to the practice of covering their head while walking. Another coping strategy is walking together in groups, to and from work. (Sultan 2006: 14-15)

A Pathways survey of working women in Bangladesh found that 22 per cent of women in work outside the home, whether the formal or informal sector, experienced harassment or abuse at work; this compared to only 6-8 per cent of women working within the home, suggesting that staying at home 'protects' women from harassment and abuse (Kabeer *et al.* 2009). It is worth emphasising that the evidence on the relationship between domestic violence and women's paid work is varied and inconsistent: there is no linear relationship between paid work and the reduction in domestic violence, and this appears to vary over time. This highlights the central importance of context in understanding the relationship between security and economic empowerment:

[T]he more general absence of a consistent relationship between women's involvement in paid work and the incidence of domestic violence reminds us that domestic violence is the product of a complex interplay of power relations within and beyond the household, and only partly determined by economic factors. (Kabeer 2008: 48)

Kabeer identifies the range of factors that determine domestic violence in different contexts in addition to the nature of paid work and economic security to include dowry demands, alcohol consumption, the experience of domestic violence as children by either partner, social relationships, and the duration of participation in different economic activities (such as microfinance). The lack of a linear connection between violence and women's paid work is of great policy significance, and in particular may prove to be a challenge for the measurement of development 'results'. DFID's current gender strategy includes 'pillars' of action whose outcomes may not always be consistent with each other, at least over the short- and medium-terms: violence against women may not be reduced and is likely to be exacerbated when women's control over economic assets, including work, increases. Understanding how and when this occurs, and how women can organise to protect themselves are critical issues for policy and practice.

Examples of trauma and enduring psychological harm from insecurity include the after-effects of war, as in contemporary Sierra Leone (see also Fofana-Ibrahim 2007):

Psychosocially, many women suffer in silence, carry the shame and stigma of their rape and abduction experience and are reluctant to discuss these experiences or seek help (Abdullah, Fofana-Ibrahim and King 2010: 43).

As noted above, domestic violence can include emotional abuse and violence. In her study of urban women in Bangladesh, Huq finds intense psychological pressures on women to maintain marital stability even at the cost of enduring violence and abuse:

The sense of helplessness and vulnerability that women experience at abandonment is intense enough to make them claim that a marriage should be maintained at any cost possible. While only "bad" men cheat on, beat excessively and leave their wives, the ultimate responsibility of keeping a marriage alive is to be shouldered by the wife. "There's nothing a woman can't do. If her husband is "bad", she should know that it is very much within her power to turn him into a better man". Underlying a woman's role in preserving a marriage is the norm patience 'dhorjo'. The women claim that it is the failure to engage with this virtue that is leading to the increasing fractures in marriages - fractures that can be cemented by women exerting themselves in being patient. Thus, patience is the virtue a woman needs to engage with in order to have the requisite interiority that safeguards the maintenance of a marriage, which is considered to be not only a social ideal but also a religious one. (Huq 2009: 21-2)

Mahmud also identifies a range of emotional and psychological pressures arising from the insecurities of women's lives in Bangladesh (2006), including impacts on mental health from intimidation and fear of violence and the need to preserve their reputations or chastity:



The ramifications of psychological violence such as threats, humiliation, denying money for children and isolation are deeper and contribute to women's mental ill health by shattering self esteem and debilitating her ability to function properly ... Many women put up with abusive relationships in the home as it gives them a blanket of economic or livelihood security and protects them from the threat of public violence. Insecurity also explains why women tolerate and endure in silence male abuse in public spaces and the workplace. In fact, insecurity of reputation and fear of violence in public spaces is seen as a greater threat by women than violence faced in the home, and women often provide a kind of perverse justification for domestic violence: 'he loves me so he can beat me' ... The social ostracism of raped women constitutes another kind of insecurity and violence since it is widely believed that women are responsible for their own rape (2006: 16-7).

Occupational safety or insecurity in women's livelihoods and work take a range of forms, including violence in the deployment of labour such as the use of trafficked or forced child labour in export manufacturing in India (Barrientos 2008), and harassment and other threats on route to as well as within garments factories in Bangladesh (Mahmud 2006), as well as in relation to shrimp cultivation for export, which has provoked organised resistance by women against poor working terms and conditions, the use of force to acquire land and secure compliance, and environmental degradation (Sultan 2006). It is worth emphasising that women (and children) experience acute forms of insecurity in relation to export manufacturing, an area of paid work that has been widely seen as empowering. Yet more 'traditional' areas of women's labour such as paid domestic work are also major sources of violence and rights abuses (Gonçalves 2009; Sultan 2006). Evidence indicates that migration for work in Pakistan and from Bangladesh to other countries exposes women to a range of threats (Khan 2006; Sultan 2006), quite separate from the hazards of trafficking or forced migration. However, evidence suggests that efforts to 'rescue' women from trafficking are also risky:

[o]ften the rescue processes are violent, aggressive and do not take into account the wishes of the women being "rescued". Most are unable to go back to their homes because of various legal and social problems and when released they are again at risk of being picked up by traffickers. (Sultan 2006: 30)

Kabeer (2007) also documents the risks and opportunities associated with the wide range of occupations and economic activities opened up by the global economy.

## **2.3 Empowering responses to women's insecurity**

### **2.3.1 Opportunities for change in conflict and authoritarian settings**

While insecurity may impede processes of women's empowerment, the review found that the more direct effect of violence and rights abuses was their appearance as sites around which women mobilise. This is particularly notable in how women organise within the fractures left in social relations by conflict or war. Conflict and national liberation struggles as well as mass mobilisation around particular forms of violence or rights abuses are identified as having given birth to contemporary women's movements in many of the countries involved in the Pathways work. In Sudan, the Sudan Women's Union emerged out of the nationalist struggle, and northern and southern women's groups mobilised around the 2002 Machakos Protocol, claiming women's rights to participate in peace building and political quotas for women (Abbas 2010). In both Sierra Leone and Rwanda, the conflict of the 1990s put women's security and women's empowerment on the political agenda, albeit in distinctively different forms with respect to women's political empowerment (Abdullah 2010; Kantengwa

2010). In Bangladesh, the women's movement and in particular the Bangladesh Mahila Parishad grew out of the struggle for liberation from the British and from Pakistan (Nazneen *et al.* 2010; Nazneen and Sultan 2009a, 2009b).

Among the alternative identities that women have been able to adopt in conflict settings is that of the liberation fighter or frontline activist: these can be potent modes of agency, but not ones which are usually associated with the liberal notion of the empowered woman. It is clear that armed conflict is not only experienced as a security threat by women: as Jad (2008, 2010) and Johnson (2009) demonstrate, the first intifada was a site for Palestinian women to engage in the national liberation struggle as active participants. This meant an entirely new political identity for Palestinian women, but also a new social identity, as:

[U]nmarried women's bodies ... were conceived as in service to a national and social project. Older women (45-65) ... often expressed this sentiment: a common refrain, articulated by 52-year old Mariam from Breij camp in Gaza was: "I wanted to be someone, to serve society". This service was frequently seen as replacing marriage and advancing the national struggle against occupation. Coming back from her university studies in Cairo in 1971, Zahera Kamal, who later became the first Minister of Women's Affairs in the Palestinian Authority noted: "No, I was not thinking of marriage. It was the start of occupation and that was on my mind". In contemporary Palestine, the notion of the body (and mind) in service to the nation has been radically re-configured. (Johnson 2009: 6-7)

Yet the chaos that typifies Palestinian politics has helped prevent a more unified women's movement from emerging that can challenge women's subordination in the movement or the society more broadly (Jad 2010).

There are situations in which the extreme nature of the security threat can forge kinds of agency that would be unthinkable in times of peace. Abdullah *et al.* note that when the Sierra Leone government was overthrown in 1997, the brutality of the coup leaders meant women political activists were unable to mobilise collectively, and so they 'engaged in covert activities as undercover agents infiltrating the junta, exposing its activities in arms deals, diamond smuggling and naming its international partners' (2010: 39). Azim points out that conflict does not only feature as a threat to women's choices and agency, but involves women as actors in the conflict themselves, with the creation of new images of women:

The image or the role can be expanded into that of the creation of the militant woman herself, whether as nationalist or religious militant. The history of female militancy has been celebrated, whether it be in the figure of the Palestinian freedom fighter, Leila Khaled, or Pritilata Waddedar who emerges as a heroine from the annals of the Bengal terrorist movement. It is religious militancy, of the Islamic or the Hindu brand, that makes us wonder about the role of women in transforming society. The way women's daily lives are lived within war torn regions, as well as how the discourse over their bodies work themselves out in their personal lives are areas that need to be looked at for better understanding. (Azim 2006: 3)

Feminists' efforts to politicise the experience of mass wartime rape triggered the initial shifts in public discourse around violence against women in post-conflict era Bangladesh. These writings reconfigured women rape victims as war heroines, in some of the earliest efforts to politicise and publicise the problem of sexual violence in the post-war period (Mohsin 2010).

The somewhat different context of industrial conflict also gave rise to a new political agency for women in Bangladesh, through protracted violence in the garments industry. This sector has been closely associated with women's economic empowerment through export employment in the past two decades. Yet women factory workers revolted en masse in 2006

(and since) in a context of low wages and no labour or union rights: factories were ransacked and people were injured, reversing the image of the docile Asian woman factory worker (Sultan 2006).

Women's movements have at times made headway – often temporarily - with authoritarian regimes, when they appear receptive to women's struggles, possibly a source of credibility and legitimacy with women and the international community (see Tadros 2010a; Mumtaz 2010). The picture appears to be, as Khattak puts it, one of 'criss-cross patterns ... informed by political pragmatism on the one hand and by ideological continuities on the other' (Khattak 2010: 56). Ghanaian military dictatorships are noted for their anti-women bias (Manuh and Anyidoho 2009). In Ghana, a tendency has been for 'wifeism' or 'First Lady Syndrome' - when wives of heads of authoritarian states form organisations ostensibly to improve conditions for women but in effect to mobilise support for their husbands' regimes (Manuh and Anyidoho 2009); this pattern is also common in Latin American authoritarian regimes. It should be noted that it is not only the wives of authoritarian dictators who present themselves as champions of women but whose agendas are conservative or disempowering: Sudanese women peace process participants (Abbas 2010), Costa Rican women legislators (Sagot 2010) and even a Ghanaian Minister for Women's Affairs (Tsikata 2009) and other women have also been found to work against empowering or securing women against violence and abuses.

In Brazil, the military dictatorship has left a legacy of reluctance among the women's movement to work with political parties (Costa 2010). In Pakistan, the picture has been mixed:

Military regimes have also instituted quotas for women with more alacrity than civilian governments; however, some military governments have been more misogynistic than others – Zia-ul-Haq's Islamisation, for example, denied women their fundamental right to equality in legal matters and helped make rape and murder compoundable private crimes. The Sharif government gave women quotas in LG but nothing at the national and provincial levels; Sharif publicly sympathised with rape survivors and declared gang-rape punishable through capital punishment, yet he preserved the Hudood Laws that provided rapists and honour killers with refuge from the law. Eventually, Musharraf's military regime defanged the Hudood Ordinances with support from the PPP in the National Assembly. (Khattak 2010: 56)

Left and progressive movements and organisations have been more reliable allies in struggles for security, but again, not in all contexts (on Pakistan, see Mumtaz 2010; on Bangladesh, Sultan 2006 and Mahmud 2006; on India, see Chakravarti no date). For the Brazilian women's movement, the experience of the revolutionary left was one of:

armed struggle, underground clandestine lives, imprisonment, torture, exile and ... authoritarianism and sexism from both the left wing organizations in which they militated as well as from the repressive state mechanisms. (Sardenberg and Costa 2009: 4)

Lessons for the women's movement have been that the risks of engaging in such settings frequently outweigh any potential opportunities for reform they may afford.

### **2.3.2 Violence as a locus for women's mobilisation**

A key point to emerge from this synthesis is that violence and related insecurities are frequently a locus for successful mobilisation by women. Instances of successful campaigns on violence issues which help establish the women's movement and its organisations and strategies were found across the very diverse contexts included in this research. This finding

challenges or reformulates our starting assumption that women's insecurity matters because it prevents their empowerment. The many documented instances of successful mobilisation and public action on violence contained in the Pathways collection illustrate the conceptual framing of empowerment (in section 2.1 above) as in part the struggle by women to secure their bodies and rights against violence and abuses. From the thematic synthesis, this seems to be a common locus for mobilisation because it can unify people across classes and social categories to create a broad-based movement in a way that (for instance) poverty cannot. At the same time, effective if instrumental strategies have used emotionally and morally compelling arguments about the effects of violence to place the issue of women's empowerment on the public agenda. And it is clear that several women's movements gained their stripes, building coalitions and learning the ropes of political engagement in the fight against violence against women.

Women's security issues have often been politicised around the idea of shared or universal harm; this has enabled women's movements to present a united front, and gain strength from their collective power. The recognition that acute violence during conflict affected all women was, for instance, a unifying cause in post-genocide Rwanda (Kantengwa 2010). The Women's Action Forum (WAF) in Pakistan brought together a range of otherwise disparate women's groups in response to the passing of the Hudood Ordinances in 1979, which equated adultery with rape, excluded the legal evidence of women and minorities and provided for stoning to death and flogging (Mumtaz 2010). Similarly, action on a range of forms of violence against women has involved a wide swathe of the Indian women's movement over the past three decades, including campaigns against rape, dowry violence, female infanticide and foeticide, *sati*, sexual harassment (or 'eve-teasing') and domestic violence (Kanchan no date).

In a particularly striking instance of how mobilisation around violence against women can set the political stage for further mobilisation and organisation, the Ghanaian women's movement took uncharacteristically direct action against police failures to apprehend a serial killer who was targeting women in Accra, in the late 1990s. This mobilisation intensified around the time of a general election which was lost by the incumbent. The new president expressed his gratitude to the women's movement, credited with having enabled his success, by announcing the establishment of a Ministry for Women's Affairs. Although the less than positive experience of national women's machineries in Africa meant this had never been a demand of the women's movement. Yet the activism and the engagement with the state paved the way for subsequent legislation (including on domestic violence), and to strong and enduring coalitions and networks of women's groups (Tsikata 2009).

Certainly, the political apprenticeship with engaging with the state that mobilisation around violence often engenders is not always easy. The process of collective action on violence against women taught the Indian women's movement some key lessons about engaging wider public action:

[O]ne of the first issues to receive countrywide attention from women's groups was violence against women, especially in the form of rape and dowry death. This was also the beginning of a learning process for women as most protests were directed at the state. Since women were able to mobilise support, the state responded seemingly positively by changing laws related to rape and dowry and making them more stringent. This seemed at that time like a great victory. It was only later that the knowledge began to sink in that mere change in the law meant little unless there was a will and machinery to implement these. What was also starkly revealed was that the root of discrimination against women lay not only in the law or with the State but was much more widespread. (Chakravarti no date: 25)

Organising around the issue of acid violence, the women's movement in Bangladesh also learned about how to work with government. The need for more accountable public policy was recognised, but working with police, government officials, and public hospitals meant the effort was slow and tough. The campaign against acid violence succeeded in creating a considerably stronger public response to the problem, in part through the strategic use of emotion, involving the mass media in communicating the testimonies of acid survivors to build mass opinion in favour of change (Nazneen and Sultan 2009a). This successful engagement has enabled women's organisations to develop other model interventions that strengthen accountability to women, such as surveys to measure incidences of violence and psycho-social counselling for women and girls affected by violence (Nazneen and Sultan 2009b).

There is much literature and evidence on women's organising around characteristically feminist issues such as violence against women, but to date there has been less emphasis on how women's struggles for economic justice have combined with their concerns about security (or safety) in relation to work (Kabeer 2008). In many instances, organising around work-related safety concerns has brought a feminist perspective to more traditional organised labour issues:

The literature on collective action by women workers' organisations suggest that they have sought to bridge the hitherto dichotomous concerns of class and gender in ways that reflect women's location at the intersection of production and reproduction. Class issues have been re-interpreted from a gender perspective while gender issues have been recast in class terms. Demands for equal pay for work of equal value, for equality of access to training, promotion and other economic opportunities have been added to redistributive demands for better wages, decent working conditions, social security, security of shelter and the right to organise. Protection against sexual harassment in the work place and in the streets and the right to maternity (and parental) leave and child care support have been added to feminist struggles over domestic violence and women's reproductive and sexual rights. The merging of struggles for recognition and redistribution allow women workers to transcend the public-private divide which served to compartmentalise their concerns within the traditional trade union agenda and closed off the possibility of public action around 'private' forms of injustice. (Kabeer 2008: 78)

Kabeer draws a direct link between women's safety and their capacities to engage in (empowering) paid work, highlighting how these connections have been a high priority for women workers.

A final point on the significance of violence as a locus for women's mobilisation is that security concerns have often been an instrumental entry-point for women's empowerment it seems not only because bodily integrity is an 'entry-level right', but also because the emotional and moral significance of violence can be mobilised around and used strategically to powerful effect. The case of acid violence in Bangladesh discussed above is a well-documented example of the strategic use of emotional and moral arguments to advance policies to empower women. Analyses of policy process and practice in relation to the pathways of women's empowerment note the instrumental use by feminist activists of arguments about the economic and health costs of violence against women to place such issues on the public policy agenda:

The effective policy activist *identifies the opportunities for introducing discursive shifts within the dominant rules of the game*. The selective use of instrumentalist arguments can be part of a game plan for changing these rules. An example is the global campaign against violence to women. As part of that campaign, the 1993 *World Development Report* was used to demonstrate that such violence brought health and

economic costs. Instrumentalist, as this approach seemed to some, within mainstream organisations such as DFID, it made violence against women at last a permissible subject of discussion, providing an entry point for subsequent recognition that this was a human rights issue. (Eyben 2010: 58-9; see also Eyben 2008)

### **2.3.3 Responses and resistance**

The findings section of this review concludes on a positive note, by exploring some of the new and varied strategies for responding and sites of resistance to insecurity and control of women's lives and bodies. This collection highlights a number of significant new spaces in which strength and capacity to resist violence and rights abuses is being sparked and fostered. Some of the sites in which resistance is seeded or generated represent surprising alternatives to an emphasis on empowerment as occurring within self-help groups or formal sector employment, including culture, drama, and television. These findings could encourage reflection by development policy and practitioners on the possibility of widening their gaze to take into account the full range of spaces and sites in which women respond and resist the insecurities they face in their efforts to empower themselves.

In one example, Fofana-Ibrahim describes her use of feminist and critical pedagogy to encourage male and female university students in Sierra Leone to analyse trauma and their experiences of conflict. Her strategy is to create an empowering experience that enables young men and women to cope and avoid despair, while also acknowledging and addressing the inequalities that bred the conflict (2007). A showing of the Vagina Monologues in Serbia in aid of a group that works with Bosnian women who were raped during the war there drew an audience far wider than the women's movement usually draws, forging strong links among groups struggling against sexual violence (Cornwall and Jolly 2006).

Other initiatives to dramatise insecurity as a source of resistance have been used to great effect in a number of contexts, such as street plays in Rajasthan (Chakravarti no date) and an innovative mock tribunal in Kenya:

'[E]vidence' was presented in the form of testimony from and on behalf of women who had experienced unsafe abortion and from medical providers ... the mock tribunal was enormously successful in engaging media debate, which continued for over a week after the tribunal had ended and opened up a space in the public eye for debate about abortion. (Cornwall *et al.* 2008: 7)

Cornwall *et al.* 2008 note 'the powerful metaphor of the law as a way of opening up space for dialogue'. The power of the law to reframe the terms of the debate is also evident in changes to family law in Egypt. Procedural reforms there had not resulted in substantial legal empowerment for women, but they had created powerful momentum for change, spurring women's rights activists to seek a legally equitable model of marital rights and responsibilities (Al-Sharmani 2010).

For young Palestinian women, resistance against insecurity came in the form of education as a site for 'challenging borders and expanding boundaries':

A female secondary school student explains that restrictions cause both despair and resolve among girls: The suppression of girls' opinions and our culture of shame means families do not like their girls to study and rent places outside the village. This comes from hearing so much about the problems of girls, particularly honour crimes. This causes girls to be depressed but also causes them to cling to education. (Johnson 2010: 108-9)

Pleasure, love and leisure also featured in these positive accounts of resistance to insecurity or violence. An emphasis on pleasure as a counterpoint to an unremittingly negative focus on sexual violence was highlighted as a strategy for avoiding defining survivors by their negative experiences or depicting sexual violence as the norm (Jolly 2010). An NGO in India that had made room for women to reflect on the connections between desire and violence was encouraged to develop alternative approaches that succeeded in resisting victimhood and promoting pleasure. In rural Bangladesh, women members of a landless organisation in Bangladesh drew strength from their personal and social relationships forged through the organisation for their resilience to the backlash their mobilisation caused:

[P]eople of this area created obstacles – they wanted to break our legs, they wanted to crack our heads open, ostracise us from the society. They said they wouldn't come to our children's wedding. They used to swear at us using bad language. We overcame all the obstacles and we had the strength so long as the organisation was with us. Now we are with them, though we had swerved in the middle. (Kabeer and Huq 2010: 84)

In urban Bangladesh, women have been learning about resistance against violence from television:

One of the most common themes that our viewers enjoy watching is the battle between a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Our respondents enjoyed this narrative because it gave them pleasure to see a nasty daughter-in-law taught a lesson or a conniving mother-in-law meted her punishment. A respondent from Gerua commented: A daughter-in-law is abused by her mother-in-law; after that the mother-in-law is taught a lesson. She (the mother-in-law) then starts to feel sorry and thinks 'Why did I do this? I shall never do it again'. When she understands, it makes us feel very good. A married woman in Bhasantek said, 'We don't just like rebellion. At first she must try to be tolerant. If the situation pushes her against the wall, only then should she revolt'. This woman enjoyed narratives not just showing revolt, but also showing the dilemma of putting up with abuse and the tensions that this builds until the moment when tolerance wears out and the protagonist stands up for herself and reclaims her ground. Watching these conflicts onscreen may perhaps offer hope for women who have to endure such injustices themselves. An unmarried respondent in Bhasantek said: Seeing women protest is a matter of learning. It shows that women can stand up against injustice. These should be shown much more on television. Then we can learn that women will not tolerate injustice silently. And those who oppress will learn that women will not stand for it. That the unmarried woman spoke so plainly against any oppression by in-laws and the married respondent but was much more careful about rebelling, highlights the tenuous position of the married woman, who has to balance her role as a good daughter-in-law with any injustices she suffers. (Priyadarshini and Rahim 2010: 122)

The researchers suggest that there are several ways in which watching television empowers these women: their pleasure comes partly from the hope that such abuses can be challenged, and also partly from the reflection they expect such dramas will evoke in the hearts and minds of other would-be oppressors. The limits to their hopes are marked by the fact that the unmarried woman has more freedom to rebel than her married counterpart.

While popular culture can portray relatively empowering images of women, it can also depict misogynistic and objectionably sexualised images, as has been the case in popular music in Ghana (as elsewhere). Yet its potency as a tool for reaching young people and influencing mass culture has meant researchers in Ghana have been exploring pop as a site for resistance, proposing:

[A] variety of potential pathways to alternate representations of women including: increasing numbers of female artists, grooming a "Manchurian Musician" to sing for

change, returning to basic values, heightening censorship activities, boycotting music that does not benefit society, emphasizing creativity, and commentating or opening spaces for commentary within popular media to discuss songs with negative messages. (Ampofo *et al.* 2009: 41)

Other new and proposed sites of resistance include men, and efforts to challenge gendered stereotypes of men as abusers and perpetrators of violence, so as to begin to engage them in more productive and creative ways of challenging prevailing forms of gendered power. These include working in the sports and entertainment industries to encourage positive male role models (Esplen and Greig 2008).

## 3 Conclusions and implications for policy and practice

This paper reports on a thematic synthesis that aimed to derive lessons about how security and insecurity shape processes of women's empowerment in developing countries. It is based on analysis of the full body of research outputs from a five-year programme of research on the Pathways of Women's Empowerment, which included around 60 researchers in 15 countries working within four broad themes: voice, work, body and concepts of empowerment. The paper coded, synthesised and analysed 142 research outputs (all of those available at the time of the review), both conceptual and empirical work, and finally included reference to 115 of those outputs which made at least some reference to women's security or insecurity. The Pathways research was not centrally designed to address the issue of security, as the programme had concluded that a focus on violence against women was likely to be inconsistent with its research and political philosophy focusing on feminist approaches to women's agency and power. However, as the research proceeded, security and insecurity issues recurred in the findings and conceptual work of Pathways, and so the present synthesis was designed to extract interpretive and empirical findings about how security and insecurity shape processes of empowerment as these emerged as additional to the core questions and themes being addressed. The synthesis was not a systematic review as it did not review work outside the Pathways collection, nor select papers according to quality or other criteria. However, the synthesis used a thematic synthesis methodology as commonly used in systematic reviews of qualitative research, and has some additional features in common with systematic review methodologies.

### 3.1 Key findings: insecurity cross-cuts processes of empowerment, but also triggers responses that empower

There are two broad conclusions from this analysis. The first is that **insecurity cross-cuts the pathways of women's empowerment in developing countries**. Insecurity takes a number of different forms, operates at several different levels and with degrees of severity; these also vary greatly across places and change over time. As is the case in the process of women's empowerment more generally, context matters. The recognition that insecurity – defined here as the risk or reality of violence or rights abuses - features across the different contexts of women's empowerment is not intended as an alarmist suggestion that violence limits the prospects for women's empowerment or that women cower before its threat under all conditions. It is instead a reminder of some of the basic features of context, structure and power relations within which women's lives are lived. It is specifically a reminder to researchers, policymakers and practitioners that women's empowerment never occurs in



economic and social settings insulated from conflict, aggression or the threat of domination, some of which sources of insecurity have particularly gendered effects.

It is worth recalling that this range of different sources of insecurity emerges as relevant to processes of women's empowerment even from a body of research which explicitly rejects a victim of violence standpoint. It should be noted that many of the sources of insecurity that affect women in developing countries also affect men, either directly or because of their relationships with women. This review has focused on the gendered dimensions of those sources of insecurity, yet it is clear that it is not only as women that these are experienced.

One of the reasons insecurity emerges as endemic along the pathways of women's empowerment is that many of the studies involved qualitative research into women's experiences which uncovered some of the subtler and more neglected sources of insecurity in their lives: sexual harassment, norms of femininity and masculinity, socially sanctioned aggression against transgressive gender behaviour, and control of women's mobility. Some of these 'everyday' sources of insecurity had psychological or other effects that were not overt or self-evident. When taken into account, they help to explain the diverse strategies and negotiations women deploy in their struggles to gain power over their lives, and may help to explain why some interventions and policies are more successful than others. A key message is that some quite mundane sources of insecurity - and not only its overt forms like armed conflict or physical violence - are among the important structures of constraint shaping women's prospects for gaining power.

The second broad conclusion is that insecurity does not prevent women's empowerment: instead, **it is in opposing and resisting insecurity that some of the most powerful of women's individual and collective agency are found.** Again, it should be noted that this emerges from a collection which explicitly eschews a victim standpoint, and which takes a perspective on empowerment as a collective struggle. The conceptual analyses from the very different regions allow that women's agency is shaped and indeed constrained by belligerence and fear, and by the unlawful and the sanctioned abuses of their rights. But they also recognise that women (people) become agents partly through such experiences.

In viewing violence not from the perspective of victimhood but from the perspective of women with agency, the Pathways collection of research highlights the responses violence and abuses evoke. These include how individual women negotiate and resist violence and its associated or latent threats. They also include how women collectively come to contest violence and related abuses as a rallying moral concern with the power to unite disparate group interests, through nascent women's movements and broader coalitions. These struggles against violence against women have been important political apprenticeships for the women's movement in many developing countries. Instead of these structural insecurities, fears, aggression and abuses preventing women's empowerment, it is often precisely the abrogation of 'entry-level rights' to bodily integrity that triggers empowering forms of mobilisation, and around which women's political agency and organisation is built.

These collective efforts to secure women's rights to freedom from violence are neither straightforward nor trouble-free. The collection also highlights conflict situations in which extreme gender-based violence has destabilised gender norms and relations to create critical junctures in the pathways of women's empowerment: these opportunities to change paths are not always grasped, however, and the international community has frequently failed to support women's equal participation in post-conflict reconstruction and development efforts. And in addition to failures to grasp opportunities where these exist, there are numerous instances of policy reversals and social backlash against progress made; of conservative women, themselves the beneficiaries of positive action protecting customary male privileges of domination; of technological advances in sources of insecurity (using the internet or SMS for sexual harassment, for instance). From the perspective of women's empowerment as a

journey rather than a destination, however, it should be clear that it is in and around the endemic and the everyday sources of insecurity that women's social and collective political empowerment has gathered force in these developing country contexts. These campaigns and movements have helped enable women to move around in public, to study and to work, to enjoy their leisure and their sexualities, and to engage politically, as voters, civic actors and political representatives.

### 3.2 Policy and practice implications

Several policy and practice implications arise from these conclusions.

- 'Securitising' women's empowerment

More effective policymaking and interventions around women's and girls' empowerment should be attuned to and take into account how the sources of insecurity relevant to that context shape women's prospects for personal, social, political and economic empowerment. Interventions relating to women's empowerment could be informed by mapping and tracking the sources of insecurity that shape the lives of women and girls in that context. They could also benefit from better understanding of the everyday and hidden sources of insecurity in addition to the more obvious crime and conflict data; such understanding requires grounded analyses of women's and girls' lives and perspectives. This should not mean blocking efforts to enable women to gain paid work, sexual autonomy or political voice if so doing runs the risk of incurring aggressive backlash, but being attuned to such possibilities and poised to respond if they occur. It is partly a matter of being better equipped to operationalise the multi-dimensional nature of women's empowerment within interventions.

Approaches to gender in relation to conflict, security and fragility could also be sensitive both to how insecurity constrains women's economic, social and political power, and to the opportunities for them to gain power in these domains that may arise in post-conflict societies in which gender norms and policies may have become more malleable.

- Measuring empowerment

If the processes of women's empowerment are cross-cut by violence and abuses and galvanised by efforts to negotiate and resist them, efforts to accurately track or measure empowerment should take this into account. This has implications for development results measurement which may need further clarification. We know, for instance, that processes underlying the main indicators of gender equality and women's empowerment may interact with each other, change at different paces or with lagged effects; they may also move in opposing directions at particular times, depending on context. From this thematic synthesis, there are good reasons to believe that trends and changes in three of the four 'pillars' in the DFID Strategic Vision for Girls and Women (delayed marriage, increased assets and post-primary education) may not always move in the same direction or in the same time period as the fourth (violence); in certain contexts, progress on education, age at marriage and women's assets may also mean a rise in violence (or the fear of violence) in the short term (see also Vyas and Watts 2009; Castro, Casique and Brindis 2008). A more accurate indicator of women's empowerment may be of the extent of resistance or mobilisation against violence, rather than of its prevalence.

- Investing in empowering responses to insecurity

The Pathways collection did not focus on the provision of justice and security institutions, yet the focus on women's mobilisation demonstrated the considerable scope for responses to insecurity that empower women individually and collectively, and which lead to institutionalised official responsiveness and accountability towards women's concerns. From this, and the recognition that empowerment and security are closely enmeshed with each other, it would make considerable sense for investments in the police and the formal or non-formal justice sectors to instil a women's empowerment approach in their programmes. Keeping in mind the multi-dimensional nature of women's empowerment, such an approach should seek to avoid burdening women with uncompensated participation in user committees and other social accountability activities. They should instead focus on improving the provision of security in sectors that matter to women's empowerment, including in occupations of importance to poor women such as petty trading, vending, domestic or sex work; tackling sexual harassment in public spaces, on public transport or in public institutions (e.g., schools and colleges, government offices); and protecting women's rights to participate in politics at all levels without the fear of violence (see also UNIFEM 2008).

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