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# **The Contribution of Citizen Views to Understanding Women's Empowerment as a Process of Change: the Case of Niger**

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## **The Contribution of Citizen Views to Understanding Women's Empowerment as a Process of Change: the Case of Niger**

### **Abstract**

This article investigates citizen's views on women's empowerment as a process of change in Niger, the lowest country on the Human Development Index where women suffer widespread gender inequality. It draws on semi-structured interviews with radio and civil society organisation (CSO) representatives and on focus group discussions with radio listeners. By discussing how empowerment is perceived by the three groups, it examines which aspects of life disempower women and what could contribute to an empowering environment. It goes on to analyse how these responses can be used to shape radio broadcasts, to promote further female empowerment. Contributing to journalism, development, and women's studies, the article provides valuable and transferable insights into the understanding of female dis/empowerment, which can be used in other similar developing countries.

Key words: empowerment, Niger, women, radio, CSOs

### **Introduction**

In Niger, which ranks lowest on the Human Development Index (UNDP 2018), women play a particularly subjugated role. Their legal status seriously hinders their social-economic potential and reinforces widespread gender inequality. Attempts to empower women in this mostly patriarchal and traditional society are rendered even more complex because the very concept of empowerment is ambiguous and difficult to define.

Radio in Niger has the ability to exert a significant influence over its listeners. It is the primary source of information in the country and has an extensive reach in contrast to other media platforms. Its broadcasts can therefore be specifically targeted to promote empowerment, or greater freedom of choice, amongst women both on an everyday level and in the longer term as part of a process of change (Kabeer 1999). Yet radio must be made more aware of the wishes of its female listeners when producing programmes. Similarly, civil society organisations (CSOs) and particularly women's CSOs have the authority to prompt change within society.

This article contributes to journalism, development and women's studies. It draws on male, female and mixed focus groups of radio listeners, groups which are influenced by broadcasts, and also on interviews with representatives from radio and CSOs, which shape the broadcasts, to discuss the role of women in Nigerian society. By considering how empowerment is perceived by the three groups, it examines which aspects of life disempower women and what could contribute to an empowering environment. It goes on to analyse how these responses can be used to shape radio broadcasts, to promote further female empowerment. It thus provides transferable insights into the understanding of female dis/empowerment and the contribution of radio, which can be used in other conflict-affected areas.

### **Definitions of Empowerment**

Empowerment, a difficult-to-define term (Kabeer 1999; Cornwall and Eade 2010; Ewerling et al 2017), has been widely “used and abused” (Batliwala 2007, 557) in development spheres. The resultant use of top-down approaches, which viewed women as beneficiaries, rather than agents of change, led to criticism that the term had become an ambiguous “catch-all” label. Yet, it continues to prevail internationally right up to inclusion in the UN Sustainable Development Goals, with its useful “specific gendered meaning: the transformation of the relations of power between men and women, within and across social categories of various kinds” (Batliwala 2007, 560).

Yet, to evaluate how women can be empowered, the manner in which they are disempowered within society must be understood as power can be considered “in terms of the *ability to make choices*: to be disempowered, therefore, implies to be denied choice” (Kabeer 1999: 436-7). Thus, only when a woman's disempowered position is comprehended can an effective strategy be constructed to empower her to make her own decisions. Empowerment can be considered as “people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them” (Kabeer 1999, 437). Measuring empowerment requires a multi-layered approach and a consideration of first- and second-order choices (Kabeer 1999; Jansson 2014); the former being, for example, a choice of whether to engage in politics (Arestoff and Djemai 2016), and the latter reflecting “everyday decisions which do not affect the overall outcome of a woman's life” (Kabeer 1999, 437).

Kabeer demonstrates that empowerment can be measured based on three pre-conditions: “resources” (finances, family or community support), “agency” (“the ability to define one's goals and act upon them” (1999, 438)) and “achievements” (outcomes) (1999, 437) and suggests that empowerment is a “process of change” (Kabeer 1999, 437), not a monolithic solution for disempowerment. This builds on Sen's concept of “capabilities”, which are the potential people have to live the lives they want and achieve valued ways of “being and doing” (1985). Here, a lack of decision-making does not necessarily constitute disempowerment. Disempowerment is the inability to achieve one's goals due to the inability to make choices that are contingent on unsurmountable and deep-rooted restrictions. In terms of women's empowerment, these “structures of constraint” (Kabeer 2005) are cultural norms and values which affect a woman's place in society. Scope remains, however, for smaller and private empowered decision-making (Chen 1983; Kabeer 1997), underscoring the power of

changes within households, which increase women's "backstage" influence in the decision-making process.

Another necessary condition for women's empowerment is their ability to critically question the gender norms of their society. As Freire states, "the oppressed must confront reality critically, simultaneously objectifying and acting upon that reality", adding that "a mere perception of reality not followed by this critical intervention will not lead to a transformation of objective reality – precisely because it is not a true perception" (1970, 37). Ewerling and Lynch's SWEPER index (2017) measures African women's empowerment based on attitudes to violence, social independence, and decision-making. They argue that "empowerment for women only happens when they can envisage a different life and consider themselves able and entitled to make decisions. It involves the development of a critical consciousness of women's rights and of gendered power relations, and how these can be changed" (2017, 916). Therefore, women need to recognise any disempowering societal views they have internalised. Women's choices must not emanate from a place of consent and complicity with patriarchal dominance, nor must they occur as a result of coercion and conflict (Kabeer 1999; Porter 2013).

These theories of empowerment frame women as a group. However, "woman" is not a homogenous category. To measure empowerment, an intersectional approach, reflecting class, ethnicity and age, must be adopted (Hughes and Drubow 2018) and this will lead to varying conceptualisations of the dis/empowerment of women from within the same society. This is equally applicable to the researcher who measures empowerment and to organisations, who aim to empower those in a less privileged position (Glennister, Walsh and Martin 2018). Reinforcing this, Kabeer acknowledges potentially different expectations between those being measured and those measuring empowerment. Complex and broader achievements such as women's political representation "entail the move away from the criteria of women's choices, or even the value of the communities in which they live, to a definition of 'achievement' which represents the values of those who are doing the measuring" (Kabeer 1999, 440). This consideration is vital when the drive to empower women in Africa and the assessment of this goal emanates from Western-based NGOs and scholars.

### **Niger and Women's Empowerment from a Political Perspective**

Niger, where women suffer widespread gender inequality, provides a powerful case study to discuss empowerment. It has a 75% child marriage rate with a third of adolescent girls married before the age of 15 (UNFPA 2012) and the highest fertility rate in the world at 7.239 births per woman (World Bank 2017). Literacy rates are low with a 15.1% secondary school completion rate for girls (34.5% for boys) (Save the Children 2016). Polygamy is widespread and legal, and violence against women is rife. Female genital mutilation is also common despite being illegal (Thomson Reuters 2018) and women, in this mostly patriarchal and religious society, do not have access to the same legal status as men in the traditional and customary courts.

Nonetheless, Nigerien women display considerable agency in society with evidence of representation at mayoral level, in local associations, in CSOs and in the National Assembly where 29 of the 171 *députés* are female (Assemblée.ne 2018). Micro-credit groups

exist throughout the country, which help women conduct limited, income-generating activities. Numerous non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and development agencies operate in Niger, many operating in the general domain of human rights and women's rights. A large number of these are female CSOs, many receiving international support, and are powerful within the country. Often working in collaboration, they strive to exert pressure on Nigerien authorities, where the political stance on women's rights issues is complex (Alio 2009; Ibrahima 2008). They demonstrate that collective action is needed to cultivate empowerment, acting "as a tool for effective agency, a task often conducted by women's organisations" (Stromquist 2015, 549; see also Parpart et al. 2002). It is because of their awareness of the socio-economic, legal and political aspects affecting women's daily lives and their continual struggle on their behalf that the opinions of these CSOs must be considered when discussing women's empowerment in Niger.

Politically, Niger adopted a 10% gender quota in 2000, lowered from a proposed 25% (Kang 2015). In 1999, Niger ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). CONGAFEN, a confederation of women's associations uniting 51 of the country's larger female CSOs, played an instrumental role in persuading the government to ratify the convention (Kang 2015; Alidou and Alidou 2008). The government, however, imposed reservations on CEDAW against which CONGAFEN have, thus far, unsuccessfully fought (Kang 2015). In 2006, the government voted against the adoption of the Maputo Protocol, a treaty on women's rights in Africa written by the African Union. Thus, despite seemingly taking progressive steps towards improving the lot of women by signing with international agreements, Niger's reticence to fully comply with them has resulted in the complex socio-political climate in which the Nigerien CSOs and radios are struggling to affect women's empowerment.

### **Role of Radio in Niger**

Radio is the most important source of information for women in Niger. Only 16.22% of the population have access to electricity (World Bank 2016), limiting television and internet use, both also being economically inaccessible to most. Radio favours illiterate or orally-based cultures as it can broadcast in local rather than colonial languages. It targets relevant issues and specific communities, be they physical communities or communities of interests (Girard 2007; Jallof 2011). Technically, in addition to its extensive reach (Pease and Dennis 1994), radio is cheap and portable (Hendy 2000), easy-to-use and ideal for isolated and developing communities and is vital for economic development and promoting good governance. It is also available in battery-operated, solar-powered and wind-up form, enabling it to change the lives of those living in extreme or inaccessible conditions (Hartley 2000; Hyden et al. 2002; Manyozo 2012; Myers 2008). Radio is influential in broad sectors of society and is significant as a development and democratising tool, allowing listeners to become better informed and, through phone-ins, talk shows and discussions, gain opportunities to get their voices heard (Chignell 2009; Hartley 2000). The intimate nature of radio must be considered (Shingler and Wieringa 1998, 114). Many of the respondents in this study highlighted the importance of radio for women as they can listen, often in a single-sex environment, whilst occupied with household chores in this patriarchal and traditional society. Sensitive subjects such as domestic violence, rape, or health issues can thus be targeted by radio to reach

women who may seek this information but be unable to obtain it in mixed environments (see also, Heywood 2018). As radio can shape women's choices and society's understanding and acceptance of these choices, their opinions on what they are broadcasting (the content) and to whom they are broadcasting (the audience) must be considered. If their attitude to women supports the patriarchal and traditional values of society, rather than those which might facilitate greater freedom of choice for women, radio may not be optimising its democratising role but is in fact reinforcing the status quo.

There were 184 community radios and 60 commercial radios in Niger in 2017 (CN-RACOM 2017). The state media is the Office de Radiodiffusion et Télévision du Niger (ORTN), including *Voix du Sahel*, the state radio. There are several private radio stations and television/radio groups, and relays for international radios (for example, RFI, BBC, Voice of America, Deutsche Welle). One feature of Niger's radio is the culture of listening groups, or *fadas*, which encourage citizens to participate in public life. Predominantly male listeners gather around radios in the street and discuss the contents. Male, female or mixed listeners' associations, which are attached to radios, also exist. Here, listeners either listen to and discuss radio programmes and provide feedback or suggest themes and even contribute to the production of broadcasts. A further characteristic of Nigerien radio is that it is widely accessed via mobile phones, which increases interaction between listeners and radios (Gilberds and Myers 2012; Nassanga et al. 2013; Sullivan 2011), encouraging people to call in and comment. Radio therefore provides a vibrant social public space for interaction, contributing to strengthening weak public spheres triggered by a lack of freedom of expression or democratic governance (Agosta 2001). Radio also has the ability "particularly in the countryside, to play a critical role in providing the space for a civil society to develop" and by working with CSOs, they can contribute to improving the lives of the community (Agosta 2001).

## **Method**

A series of focus groups of listeners and semi-structured interviews of radio and CSO representatives were conducted in April 2018 by the same facilitator in and around Niamey, Niger's capital. These groups were chosen because they actively participate in receiving or producing the country's main source of information (via radio) which, in turn, can contribute to shaping female empowerment.

The same open-ended questions and similar prompts regarding women's empowerment were used and, because there was minimal intervention from the interviewer, the respondents could discuss and raise additional issues. This qualitative approach provides an insight into listeners' perceptions of empowerment and the role of women. Focus groups are a suitable method here as shared listener experiences (McCracken 1988) were being sought rather than individual ones (Saint-Germain et al. 1993). Focus groups are intended to "generate discussion and so reveal the meanings surrounding an issue – both the meanings that people read into the discussion topic and how they negotiate those meanings" (Lunt and Livingstone 1996, 97). Thus, the article's sampling techniques did not attempt to achieve diversity in respondents or representativeness. Based on research by Guest et al that 6-12 interviews represent the number of interviews needed to reach saturation (2006), six focus groups were conducted, with 38 participants in total. A further two groups were planned but

cancelled due to heightened kidnap risks. Half the groups were in an urban setting and half rural. One group was mixed, three groups comprised women and two groups comprised men. Given the subject matter which concerns dis/empowerment, it was necessary to consider that when women lack power and voice it might be difficult to collect data from them. The facilitator had to probe accordingly. One woman, for example, in the Radio Scout focus group who had aspirations of becoming a doctor when at school, and who had had this dream taken from her once married, no longer felt she could answer questions about her future as she did not feel she had one. Careful probing was therefore required to gain information from her. Social desirability bias had to be considered in the responses and the fact that respondents might offer information which supported generally accepted views of that society rather than talking about their reality. This could be the case for respondents with regard to the researcher, to women and their female peers, and to the other gender. Neutral questions were therefore posed where possible (Nederhof 1985).

Participation in the study was voluntary but respondents' expenses were covered. The focus groups were recorded, transcribed and coded to be able to identify key themes, which were marriage, divorce, education, raising awareness, family and youth, politics, and religion. The focus groups lasted 60 minutes and were conducted in French. Where necessary, some questions were translated from local languages by French-speaking participants. The terms used were important and the very word *empowerment* is understood variously depending on context and by those uttering it and those receiving it. Care was therefore taken in its translation. The French term *autonomisation* was consistently used but this is associated, as can be deduced from the word, with the concept of *autonomy*, a condition far removed from the lives of many women in Niger. This term was not therefore the best translation of an already problematic term. The phrase "*liberté de choix*" (freedom of choice) would therefore be a better option.

15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with radio employees and with representatives of women's CSOs in and around the Nigerien capital. The radio employees were journalists and/or managers and directors. This approach ensures a "conversation with a purpose" whilst allowing the interviewer to ask follow-up questions and explore areas of interest (Gillham 2000). Again, the interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded using thematic analysis. Contradictory and similar points were identified and coded according to overarching themes. Each interview lasted 45-60 minutes. The focus groups and interviews addressed the following questions:

**RQ1** what is the role of women in Nigerien society?

**RQ2** which aspects of life disempower women?

**RQ3** how is empowerment perceived by the three groups?

**RQ4** what could contribute to an empowering environment and how could this be achieved?

**RQ5** and how can these responses be used to shape radio broadcasts, representing the primary source of information, to promote female empowerment?

## **Discussion**

### ***Disempowerment and Women in Nigerien Society***

A consensus emerged amongst the three groups (focus groups, radio, and CSO representatives) about the constraints on women, the role society obliges them to play and that their role is essential but onerous. According to Radio Alternative,

Rural women spend fourteen hours a day working, then they get no sleep as their husbands want them. They are the poorest, the least educated, with fewest rights, no access to healthcare, in greatest hardship, subject to polygamy and domestic violence.

Amongst the male respondents, women were almost revered for their capacity to do all the housework, bring up and educate the children despite having little education themselves, but men had little concept that this burden could be alleviated with their assistance. Instead, a clear demarcation emerged between men's and women's work. Women are expected to contribute financially in addition to their domestic tasks often in the knowledge that male family members pass their time in *fadas*. Voix du Sahel said "Even women who aren't educated manage to fit in some income-generating activity to help the family". Thus, a disempowering environment prevails in which women play a subservient role despite this role having a value to society. But this is not the value associated with Sen's "being and doing" (1985), as *capabilities* or the opportunities from which women would be free to choose are not available to these women, leaving them disadvantaged.

The focus groups and interviews raised many constraints, which both hindered fostering an empowering environment and brought about disempowerment. On a fundamental level, these constraints affect women's ability to influence family decisions, their freedom of movement in public spaces and their expressions of views favouring more equitable gender roles (Kabeer 1999). Many constraints appeared interwoven, with marital restrictions, traditions within a patriarchal society, acceptance of polygamy,<sup>1</sup> which is commonplace and legal, and repudiation dominating. Deliberate misinterpretation of Islam was also discussed and in the case of the Birni N'gaouré women's focus group, religion was used to justify polygamy, suggesting that men are obligated to have four wives, "we have to accept it. Not only because of our religion, but there's the number of women too. The Muslim religion forces men to take up to four women". They raised another restriction connected with religion and misinterpretations of Islam: the idea that Islam states that wives should obey their husbands, "We're Muslims, and according to religion, you can't do anything without your husband's say-so. It's forbidden. He tells you what to do". Tackling the disempowering effects of religion, or more significantly its misinterpretation, emerged as a priority amongst the radio representatives. According to Alternative radio, "Islam is the religion which stops women; tradition, patriarchy and religion work together to disempower women". "Religion is interpreted in a convenient way by many husbands" said Voix du Sahel, Challenge and Alternative.

Within this environment, women face two levels of choices, reinforcing the suggestion that "*freedom of choice*" is a better label for this concept than "*empowerment*". First-order choices determine major life strategies and second-order choices occur within a framework which cannot itself be affected by the decision-maker. Although widespread evidence of first-order decision-making exists amongst women in Niger with many being

involved in politics, civil society and in communities, second-order decision-making prevails, with many focus group women displaying resignation, verging on complicity and consent and appearing to be caught in an inward-looking environment with few displays of agency. They make choices about household tasks (yet this is their domain and this hardly represents choices, rather decisions) or when to go to the market or visit relatives, although free of movement in public spaces is subject to advance permission from male family members. Men take most household decisions and decide on major household purchases. Several focus groups stated that the choice and purchase of radios – relevant for this article – were made by male family members, who, when present at home, also controlled which programmes were playing. Women cannot pursue larger strategic life choices such as marrying at 16, agreeing to another wife being added, consenting to marital relations and thus influencing the number of children they have, leaving school, pursuing a career or entering politics. They were aware, however, that they operate with the confines of marital and other societal constraints but displayed evidence of being able to manipulate choices within the home to obtain the best alternatives for their offspring and for themselves. Differences emerged amongst families, with some appearing more liberal, and some younger women talked freely about love and claimed to have some influence over their future within the family. They did, however, acknowledge that this would be overridden if a wealthy suitor emerged when their opinions would be dismissed. Forced and early marriage is widespread, and while many brides can influence the choice of their future husbands, it is their fathers or male family members who make the final decision. However elevated they may be in their professional lives, wives will then be subject to the will of their husbands.

These “structures of constraint” on life choices (Kabeer 1994, 2005) extend beyond the domestic arena; an individual’s geographical location, for example, can hinder schooling for rural children and especially girls. Primary schooling is available in villages but secondary education means daily transport to towns, which is financially prohibitive, or requires housing offspring in towns, which is unaffordable. According to Radio Labari’s representative, given that they are responsible for educating children, women should attend school themselves; “only 50% of women go to school, 40% in Niamey. 60% therefore simply stay at home, doing nothing”. There are also constraints on access to healthcare not just because of costs or geographical limitations but because of societal and family opinions, resulting in women not taking decisions about their own healthcare. Home births dominate and there is little familial encouragement regarding pre- and post-natal care despite extensive awareness campaigns targeting both men and women. There are also the infinite economic constraints of living in the world’s poorest country (UNDP 2018).

### ***What is Empowerment?***

Each of the three groups discussed the concept of women’s empowerment. Referring to a hypothetical world which will “take time to achieve”, if at all, they suggested ways that women could escape the above-mentioned constraints to gain greater empowerment. Different meanings for this concept emerged for each group. Awareness-raising in fundamental areas including education, health, marriage, politics, and relationships was considered essential for all and they suggested this was attainable via radio, the main source of information, or through CSO-run campaigns.

In response to “what information would contribute to an enabling environment for women in Niger?” the groups provided differing responses although an overlap emerged. For female focus group respondents, empowerment would not affect them directly during their lifetimes, but would contribute to a long-term “process of change” representing potential rather than actualised choices (Kabeer 1999, 443, 437). Given that much decision-making was within the confines of marriage, “second-order choices” (rather than “life strategic” ones) were significant to them, however trivial they may appear to society as a whole or to the research team with their broader views on women’s empowerment. Education, a life-changing matter, was less important to these women as schooling was for future generations. For these married women, their chance had gone. Amongst many male respondents, girls’ education, beyond a certain level, was seen by many as a “waste of time”. Regardless of her professional success, a 30-year-old unmarried woman is not “respected”; she is perceived as having failed to fulfil her “true mission” as a wife and mother. Many female respondents appeared resigned to this situation: “it’s better to be a second or third wife than not married at all. So long as the husband manages it, polygamy works well – it allows all women to be married” (Radio Scout women’s focus group). There was, however, a generational divide. Students in the male focus group at Radio Alternative expressed a contrary opinion to that of the older men. Students welcomed the financial benefit that women would bring to the home by working and stated that a “change of mentality is needed – it’s a question of trust. Things have changed; at university, women outnumber the men, previously women didn’t even get to go to school.” Indeed, students suggested that broadcasts on love and relationships would be welcome, however contrary to prevailing traditional norms.

Supporting this, rather than wanting information on education, the female focus groups stated that access to knowledge on relations, love (contraception, diseases), sexuality, taboos and cosmetics and the ability to implement this information would help them remain attractive to their husbands, which, in turn, would prevent the latter seeking another wife, potentially reducing their status in the family and also diluting the family economy. Whilst such “empowering choices” do not determine life’s parameters, they are important for the individual’s and family’s quality of life and represent an ability which may be, in some cases, denied to them (Say and Radio Scout focus groups).

The same focus groups expressed an interest in receiving information on how to run a *petit commerce* (a small business selling seasonal products, for example). “Men prefer their wives to stay at home and not mix with other men, so running a *petit commerce* is kind of a solution to this”, acknowledged the Radio Scout men’s focus group. If women have a source of electricity and a fridge, they can sell sufficient frozen juice to provide a necessary, albeit meagre, income. Yet this inadequate solution relies on women not only being permitted by their husbands to produce the iced drinks or similar to sell, but also on purchasers coming to the home to buy; the wives cannot leave the home to sell their produce. The income may have a potentially empowering effect on the wife’s family but not immediately. Moreover, some of the women had to work out of economic necessity and therefore the ability to set up a *petit commerce* was not a liberating choice. The same lack of permission to leave the home affects other areas and women are prevented from attending listening groups or associations, widely used as sources of information on health or education of importance to the family. One solution is to create women-only associations,<sup>2</sup> yet as the Bobaye focus groups warned

“women’s groups raise awareness of women’s rights” and as women’s groups empower women through awareness-raising, they are mistrusted by many men because of the apparent misconception that female empowerment means male disempowerment.

The radio representatives’ views supported those of the focus groups, suggesting that women have some scope to become empowered within the constraints of marriage. These representatives had both an outsider view looking in on the marriages from their organisations – a main role being to inform and thus potentially trigger change – but were also mainly men, married, and often in polygamous marriages.

Furthering the discussion of marital control, Alternative and Say radios stated, “If women leave the house to work, men will find another wife”. Thus, even if given the choice to work, women must balance the advantages and disadvantages of the freedom of going out to work and the future benefits of the earned income against the potential negative effects of being in a polygamous marriage. As Kabeer states (1999), this is hardly a choice. Within the same context, before even being able to choose to work, women can be denied this choice because of the widespread practice of child marriage which disempowers women on two fronts as it leads to them leaving school early, and then giving birth at a very young age. Extensive and positive campaigning by CSOs and also via radio must be acknowledged in this regard. According to the radio representatives, much is contingent on men gaining awareness of the importance of girls staying at school, the positive effects of women going out to work, and also the need for women to seek and receive healthcare particularly concerning pre/post-natal care and child spacing.

Male radio representatives were positive about women’s ability to achieve many tasks, at work and at home, but acknowledged that expectations were higher for women than men. As Challenge FM stated, “when she takes on activities, a woman has to do them better than a man.” Nonetheless, managers amongst them declared that women were more rigorous in their work than their male counterparts and if they had a ‘free’ choice they would employ more women. Yet women were not allowed to realise this ability as traditional and societal norms act as hindrances. Despite considering women thorough and worthy of employment, radios – the very tool which could assist in their empowerment because of its democratising role – do not employ them or only give them part-time, lower status roles. This is because, as Bonferey radio stated, “They are restricted by their home life. Some can only work for radio [rather than television] as they can’t stay to do any editing in the evening and they need to leave early as they have to be home to do their chores”. This was supported widely: “Women must raise children so they cannot work” (Anfani); “women’s chores are an obstacle for education or work” (Labari). Thus, women cannot empower themselves even if well-educated because it is often impossible to work outside the home and raise children or do the chores. There is the added threat, as mentioned above, that working outside the home jeopardises stability in the home. As one male focus group respondent commented “if my wife were to go out to work, the household tasks would be abandoned so I would have to think about taking another wife”. The long-term or future potential of an empowering decision could in fact have a negative effect on the present, rendering the choice no longer meaningful. It reinforces Stromquist’s argument (2015) that the unceasing demands on women exerted by their private sphere limit their participation in the public sphere. This situation, not faced by men as they do not have task of balancing domestic chores and work,

only serves to emphasise the male/female divide. Yet, according to Tambara radio, an enabling environment is emerging:

You can't compare the situation now with ten years ago, things have really changed. There are no limits. In the interior of the country, women are joining the fight; they understand that there is more to life than doing household chores.

A dynamic process exists but this means that women have the "choice" of being able to assume additional tasks such as generating income (which in turn can make life improvements), but this is not an *alternative* because existing chores still remain and male family members will not help. Women are motivated to earn money because of the benefits it brings, but this choice is "given" by men not "decided upon" by women, serving to emphasise the gender decision-making gap. There is a need to raise awareness broadly. As the director of Radio Scout said,

Women have this key role and through them we can raise awareness, but we, as radios, need to target men too. Raising awareness amongst men and women leads to women's empowerment. Both must be targeted for women's empowerment to take place. Disempowerment is a lack of awareness and information by both genders.

Like the radio stations, CSOs as organisations have an outsider view but, as women, in contrast with the mainly male radio representatives, and knowing the situation on the ground through their community-level work and campaigning, they were aware of and promoted the second-order choices of the women in the focus groups. They did, however, also display a more generic consideration towards women's empowerment, far removed from the fundamentals of reality raised by the focus groups, advocating normative concepts (emancipation, empowerment, and politics) and encouraging women to make decisions regarding strategic life choices, including, amongst others, early marriage and therefore early childbirth. They wanted to encourage women to challenge forced or early marriage, but in the interviews, provided limited advice about creating such an enabling environment within this patriarchal and traditional society. This, however, belies the significant work undertaken by women's CSOs in Niger and appears more representative of an interview situation than the CSOs' work or approach.

The CSOs also perceived empowerment to be achievable through greater political involvement by women at any level, which could be considered ambitious given the many societal restrictions placed on women. They reinforced the widespread opinion permeating all groups that empowerment was a generational process. "Educated women understand the importance of sending their daughters to school", said CONGAFEN; if the mother is empowered, this will empower the child.

***Critical consciousness: women's ability to question societal norms and values within this environment***

Many of the above restrictions could have clear and seemingly straightforward solutions until applied to this context. As CONGAFEN said, for example, "if women could read the Quran,

they could use this to their advantage but they are disempowered because they cannot read. As a result, the Marabout will frame the text and all she can do is believe him". Sending girls to school would be the simple solution but hard to realise in this environment. Motivation to achieve change from all involved and to question internalised societal norms and values is needed, supporting Freire's concept of consciousness-raising (2005). In some focus groups, many subjects when prompted were of great interest to the listeners, for example, rights about getting married, annulling marriages and so on, but were beyond their realms of consciousness, revealing an agency 'void' amongst women. Many women only had a patchy knowledge of their legal rights; many were uncertain about the legal age of consent, or differences between official, traditional or customary marriages. As a result, in practice, cultural and social traditions dominate.

According to men from both the radios and the focus groups, women are their "own worst enemy" as their own conduct – their timidity – prevents them gaining better or more prominent positions in society.

Our women have to come out of their shells. Some women even have diplomas but permanently give way to men; they need to put themselves forward. Generally, it's in their conduct to put men first, but this is a handicap. We need to increase awareness so that they understand that they must take part in development. (Dounia)

Yet it is this way of thinking by men – attributing blame to women – that results in them deflecting any causal responsibility from themselves and society generally. The men misunderstand women's silence or timidity, instead equating it with oppression or complicity and the opposite – their speaking – with empowerment. Indeed, any actual critical consciousness amongst women manifested by greater involvement in society was viewed with caution by male respondents as a risk to society. "Politics is a slippery slope, women should have the right to vote but that is it", said Alternative's men's focus group, suggesting that women should be empowered but only to the extent that they can determine which men are in power, but not so that they can govern and therefore affect men's behaviour.

A disconnect emerged between the groups; the focus groups concentrated on second-order changes within the marriage, and the radio and CSO representatives displayed a more generic consideration towards women's empowerment, far removed from the fundamentals of reality raised by the focus groups. Given radio's influential role in society, producers of information programmes, which are designed to empower women, need to be aware of this disconnect. They need to take in account women's wishes and the fact that certain subjects they want to broadcast may require further treatment and interpreting to be best understood by female listeners. Programme contents must seek to empower women both on an everyday level (as perceived by the female focus group respondents) and be framed within broader discourses of empowerment.

## **Conclusion**

This article is important as it expands the concept of feminist studies and demonstrates the complexities of investigating female dis/empowerment in a Nigerian context, a part of the

world seldom considered by Western scholarship. It brought together the observations of three groups who actively participate in receiving, producing or influencing broadcasts by radio – the country’s main source of information – and its promotion of female empowerment. These groups were radio listeners, radio representatives and CSOs representatives. The latter two were selected because of the influence – negative or positive – they exert on the first group and particularly on women. Radio representatives displayed a positive attitude to women both regarding their role in the home and their rigour at work but claimed that social constraints prevented them employing more women. Thus, despite some radios already employing women and others wanting to take on more women, their actions were reinforcing the traditional values of society and were not contributing to promoting female freedom of choice. All groups valued radio’s potential role in raising women’s empowerment yet differences emerged about which subjects would be most beneficial. This indicated, on one hand, that those who have the ability to influence women’s lives are not fully considering the wishes of women and, on the other, that women are not being fully stretched in their long-term outlooks and continue to internalise societal constraints, remaining complicit or, at best, resigned to the situation.

The article also highlighted that woman is not a homogenous category and that many Nigerien women, ranging from female politicians to women starting *petits commerces*, are fighting for their rights, demonstrating elements of critical consciousness regarding social norms. Yet this is limited and even amongst those who do have the ability and status to make changes within society, there is inadequate awareness of which changes could be introduced or how. It was apparent from focus groups that women could receive vital information from attending associations and listening groups benefitting the whole family, but that many could not attend them if the groups were mixed. The obvious solution to create women-only groups, and thus empower and impact on societal attitudes, had to come from external sources, in this case the researcher.

The article also raises the need for appropriate terms to be used to convey the concept of empowerment. As Batliwala (2007, 564) suggested, it is only through “listening to [poor women’s] values, principles articulations and actions and by trying to hear how they frame their search for justice” rather than using potentially ambiguous terms as “empowerment” that a new discourse will emerge. The blurred application of mainstreamed terms, including “empowerment” can be too broad and lead to meaningless discussions. Confusion between the interviewer and the interviewee could result as the term is contingent on cultural norms and values associated with a woman’s place in society. Thus, not only is the concept unclear, it is exacerbated by terms used to label it and loaded with pre-conceived meanings and agenda held by the researchers. Using a phrase such as ‘freedom of choice’ for example might prove more relevant and less abstract.

Empowerment, however defined, is not localised and these findings concerning women in Niger will contribute to overall studies in this area. The measurability of empowerment is evidently problematic yet is increasingly required in today’s competitive funding environment and the need to demonstrate impact. To gain funding, claims to achieve certain levels of empowerment need to be stated but definitions are often viewed from outside the country in question, with data also being collected by teams from outside that country introducing bias if care is not taken. Long-term empowerment that is part of a process of

change may be more important to women than immediate changes as it will impact families, particularly daughters. This could mean re-shaping the resignation, complicity and consent which prevails amongst women and would, in turn, enable them to adopt views which favour more equitable gender roles, have greater freedom of movement and greater decision-making possibilities. In other words, rather than accepting their life in society and the constraints that both their private and public spheres exert on them, women must question all aspects of these. Choices, however small, remain important but must be assessed as to whether they will make a difference, and to whom, and whether they are trivial and already within “women’s domains” and therefore not new or empowering. Giving women the freedom to sell millet in streets for example (they have the freedom on one hand to leave the home and to earn some personal income, on the other) may not represent life-changing empowerment as the women may still be trapped within an unchanging marital, social, religious framework. But the process it triggers does represent empowerment as the money enables daughters to go to and stay at school, become educated, develop a critical consciousness as advocated by Freire (2005), influence decisions on marriage and career, benefit from better health and awareness, and less poverty, with a snowball effect on future generations. Empowerment, and its actualisation, must therefore be considered a process rather than a snapshot although this long-term approach may not be so welcome to donors.

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<sup>1</sup> Acceptance of polygamy by the women does not mean they agreed or disagreed with it – some respondents preferred polygamy because the additional wife provided company and a sharing of domestic tasks. It means that they merely acknowledged they could not oppose an additional wife being brought into the family or becoming a second, third or fourth wife themselves.

<sup>2</sup> A women-only listening association was set up at Radio Scout at the research team's instigation (see [www.femmepowermentafrique.com](http://www.femmepowermentafrique.com))