Over the last thirty years or so, feminist analyses have apparently influenced both thinking and practice in international development agencies. The language of gender and development has been widely adopted; checklists and gender officers proliferate. The evolution from ‘women in development’ (WID) to ‘gender in development’ (GAD) has been widely documented (Moser 1993; Kabeer 1994; Razavi and Miller 1995; young 1993). This evolution reflects parallel and not always compatible influences. On the one hand, feminist scholars have drawn attention, not only to the invisibility of women’s labour (Boserup 1970; Dixon-Mueller 1985) but to the socially constructed nature of many of the differences between men and women and to the unequal power relations they reflect. Analyses in terms of women’s subordination in the development process have conflictual implications; acknowledging difference to be the result of systematic power relations clearly potentially threatens these power relations.

On the other hand, mainstream development has taken on board and incorporated much of the empirical information provided by these feminists’ scholars. Awareness that women’s work and responsibilities had been overlooked then gave rise to calls from within the development industry itself for better integration. Many argued that a valuable resource was being wasted. A DFID report states, for example, ‘improving the status of women is a necessary precondition for sustainable and equitable development’ (ODA 1995a: 183). The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) made the premise of its policy clear in its ‘Gender information framework’: ‘the key issue underlying the women in development concept is ultimately an economic one: misunderstanding of gender differences, leading to inadequate planning and designing of projects, results in diminished returns on investment’ (USAID 1982). For the OECD, evidence for the need for gender sensitivity is threefold: investment in the education of girls yields high rates of return; women are disproportionately affected by poverty; and women are key in environmental management (OECD 1998).

Such arguments have been characterized as the ‘efficiency’ approach to women in development (Moser 1993), where, as Kabeer suggests, the emphasis was on what development could get from women, rather than on what women could get from development (1994). However, the focus on women’s productive capacity neglects their reproductive work. It also fails to scrutinize the role of men in development, even if many acknowledge that gender encompasses relations between women and men. Despite changing its form at various times, this approach still characterizes much of the work now described as gender and development.

Most recently, the goal of using women to make development more efficient has, in name at least, been supplanted by that of ‘empowerment’. This shift has a mixed history. In part, the concern with empowerment arises from the activities and arguments of feminists worldwide, many of whom challenge mainstream development intervention. Debate has taken place in an environment of increasing focus on identity politics. Awareness of the difference between women, particularly how gender subordination may be less significant than that of race or class, has given rise to discussion, sometimes acrimonious, about the role of Western feminists in setting the agenda. This has been a regular theme at the UN World Conference on Women. For example, Beijing in 1995, acceptance of the term ‘gender’ was challenged by some delegates because of this association with Western feminist arguments about the relations between men and women (Goext and Baden 1997). Mohanty has argued that
in much of what has been written about women in development, there has been a tendency to portray ‘Third World’ women as passive victims, with little consideration of either their diversity or their agency. (1988).

Along with these divisions, alliances have also been made between feminist groups worldwide who have found common cause for solidarity. Issues such as male violence and common economic subordination have been central. Overshadowing these debates, however difference their political implications may be, has been a sense among those active in them that women have been finding ways of taking greater control of their lives – or ‘empowering’ themselves. Examples are widespread, from the much-cited Self-employed Women’s Association (SEWA) of Ahmedabad in India, to less well-known cases of women organizing together around common interests (see Basu 1995, for example).

What makes this ‘empowerment’ a moot point and one that is often overlooked in the popular use of the term. Most simply, to be empowered is to gain power, but this begs a number of questions. Power is not an object or commodity and does not have fixed quantities. It describes the relationship between individuals or groups. The process of gaining power implies a change that is in some person’s or people’s interests but not those of another or others. Is it therefore possible for some to be empowered without disempowering others? It is also possible to determine what people’s real interests are without imposing our own normative frameworks? These questions have to be addressed before empowerment can be understood.

Kabeer has explored such questions, drawing on the works of Lukes (1974), by distinguishing between three different dimensions of power: ‘the power to’, ‘the power over’, and ‘the power within’ (Kabeer 1994). The first, she argues, underpins much of WID literature, which tends to focus on the capacity of individuals to make decisions and act. However, ‘the power to’ dimension fails to take account of what has been excluded from the observable decision-making process – that is, the way that institutional factors may succeed in excluding certain issues from the agenda. A second dimension tries to take this into account, and looks at how institutional rules and procedures (including those of the household) may succeed in suppressing conflict. What Kabeer calls ‘the power within’ applies Lukes’ third dimension of power, which acknowledges no only that conflict may be suppressed from the decision-making agenda, but that individuals or groups themselves may not be aware that their interests are in conflict.

Recognition of ‘the power within’, she argues, can deepen people’s awareness of conflicting interests, however problematic and piecemeal this may be (Kabeer 1994: 229). This involves the disempowered gaining greater knowledge of the conditions of their subordination and taking action to change it.

… there is a tendency to further the idea that it is women who need to do the changing. While there is still a need, therefore, for men to be aware of women’s interests, claims, and rights, it is equally crucial to make male gender identities themselves and issue. For example, if looking at who dominates in meeting, some women may be persuaded to speak out but some men might be encouraged to listen as well.

From the point of view of the organizations, the demands for simplification and categorization are strong. The more complex the information and analysis produced, the more difficult it is to act. And yet capturing men’s and women’s interests in simplistic, universal categories and systems is not useful. This is not an excuse for inaction. It is important to examine how the goals, objectives, and methods of an organization reflect particular gendered interests and how these affect their work. Challenging gender inequalities, within or outside organizations, is possible only with an understanding of power structures and relations in that particular context and a political will for change.