



# Negotiating autonomy in capacity development: Addressing the inherent tension



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## ABSTRACT

A central goal of capacity development is transforming participants into autonomous agents. However, there is often an inherent tension between capacity development and autonomy because capacity development programs are frequently set up to fill an externally predefined lack in capacity. In this article, we argue that this tension can be addressed when capacity development is set up to advance what we call “narrative autonomy” (Williams, 1997). Narrative autonomy centers on individuals’ narrative interpretations as they reveal or create the meaning of their own identity and situation, creatively draw on available materials, and discern courses of action true to these interpretations. The advancement of narrative autonomy requires certain capacities and conditions. Expanding on existing participatory approaches that focus on capacity development occurring within relationships and informal processes, we show how capacity development programs can be set up to advance these capacities and conditions through the intricate relations between formal and informal processes. We illustrate our theoretical claims through an empirical study of a capacity development partnership program involving a feminist Delhi-based civil society organization and seven local partner organizations in the state of Jharkhand. This program targeted women who had been elected to village councils. We show how the program advanced elected women representatives’ narrative autonomy through informal relationships that undergirded formal capacity development, and how the formal training helped to provide a language for constructing these narratives and a context conducive to advancing autonomous action that was true to the women’s narratives. By redefining the relationship between autonomy and capacity development, we move the theoretical debate beyond problematizing the aid-dependency power relations often seen in capacity development programs and provide a way forward for practice.

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## 1. Introduction

Capacity development programs for individuals are a common way for knowledge, patterns of behavior, and ideological orientations to be transferred from the wealthy to those in need of financial aid. Capacity development assumes either that the participant lacks certain capacities (Girgis, 2007; Hall, 1992) or that the participant’s existing capacities require strengthening. These programs also often fail to “see” and build on already-existing capacities in communities whose capacities they seek to develop. Often, they are also not driven by capacity needs identified by those whose capacities get strengthened. But even when existing capacities

and self-identified capacities are starting points, the transfer—or even strengthening—of capacities is a process that impinges on the autonomy of the participant. Any learning process changes the learner at least partly in ways shaped by the understandings of the instructors or facilitators, in this case individuals and teams conducting capacity development programs and the organizations behind them.

Conventionally, autonomy is understood as a characteristic of an individual or an organization that can act to shape their own circumstances (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1975). There is therefore a tension between capacity development and autonomy. Given that capacity development programs shape individuals in particular ways, can such programs advance their participants’ autonomy? This is the central puzzle explored in our article. We investigate a capacity development program in Jharkhand, India, that explicitly sought to increase the autonomy of female elected

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representatives. Through our examination of this Delhi-based civil society organization's (CSO) program, we show how training *can* enhance autonomy if conditions conducive to this enhancement are created. For us, capacity development encompasses the overall system, environment, and context. We recognize that organizations initiate capacity development in several ways. In this article, we focus particularly on training as an important method allowing organizations to follow a script and a direction.

Although considerable development literature addresses power relations and autonomy, (e.g. Rowlands, 1997; Sen, 1975; Mahmood, 2005; Ellerman, 2002), it does not explore the complex relationship that exists between them, particularly in the context of capacity development. In other words, autonomy is viewed as given and often absolute rather than relational and relative. Our main contribution to the field of capacity development lies in showing that capacity development programs, depending on context, may address the tensions vis-à-vis autonomy that are inherent in capacity development by facilitating the development of narrative autonomy (Williams, 1997), thereby defusing these tensions—at least in part. We point to the significance of informal processes, which have received little previous attention in the capacity development literature. We also show that the boundaries between capacity "developers" and "receivers" are far more blurred than previous work in similar and differing contexts suggests (Rowlands, 1997; Eade, 2007). We argue that narrative autonomy, as a foundation for capacity development, can serve as a guide for creating programs and conditions that do justice to the importance of informal processes.

Capacity development is an exercise in the production of subjects. Just as schools produce workers, military organizations produce soldiers, and prisons produce criminals (Foucault, 1979), capacity development explicitly seeks to produce a certain kind of subject. Viewing capacity development programs as a site for the production of new subjectivities, we suggest that participants' autonomy can in fact be enhanced. We draw on feminist approaches to autonomy to offer development practitioners a new way of designing and valuing informal practices supporting capacity development programs. Representatives of the feminist CSO we studied were explicitly conscious of their privileged position, the surrounding power structures, and the lived context of the elected women they targeted. The consciously reflective position of this CSO made it an unusual case that can serve as an exemplar of inspiring practice in capacity development.

At the start of our study of this feminist capacity development program, we expected to find that it somewhat enhanced its participants' autonomy. We found that this was indeed the case, partially because of the formal training, but also quite substantially because of the informal relationships built between the trainers and trainees, as well as the trainees' families and communities. This finding brings significant new insight into the processes that allow capacity development programs to support participants' autonomy, building on existing work that recognizes capacity development as a process rather than just an event (Brinkerhoff, 2008; Lavergne & Saxby, 2001; Venner, 2015). We draw attention to the informal but crucial work that happens between trainers and trainees, their families, and their communities as a key arena for autonomy building. This informal work is currently not recognized or compensated as labor. The informal processes we identified involved engagement with participants' families, negotiating the elected representatives' time and mobility to participate in the training program, listening to the participants' problems and suggesting creative solutions, and sometimes supporting dialogue between the participants and their families in case of disagreement. Our study seeks to make this work visible and to demonstrate its significance. In addition, we show how formal and informal processes are intricately connected, together building

capacities and creating conditions for the advancement of autonomy. We find that informal processes are the location of much transformative work, serving to create the conditions necessary for women to develop as autonomous actors. Using the metaphor of an iceberg, formal training is the visible tip of the iceberg, whereas informal processes are the submerged ice—invisible but fundamental. In this article, we claim that the participants' autonomy is embedded within the relationships and contexts that are vital to these individuals (Williams, 1997). We discuss narrative autonomy in detail below. In brief, this understanding of autonomy goes beyond the idea that autonomy is simply a fact. Rather, narrative autonomy reflects a processual understanding of autonomy as something that emerges through self-reflection and self-understanding. The longer-term informal relationships that undergird formal capacity development provide space for the development of narrative autonomy, whereas formal training helps to provide the language for constructing these narratives. This autonomy is contextual in that participants develop their interpretations and actions consistently in relation to the surrounding contexts.

In the studied context, women's social roles primarily involved their commitments within the family. In developing identities and actions as autonomous representatives of their communities, these women did not seek to separate themselves from their families or communities. Instead, they experienced the capacity development program as a way to negotiate shifts in the expectations they had for themselves. The greater confidence that many of them reported following the program was rooted in the fact that they saw themselves as the kind of people who had traveled outside the village for a work meeting where their experiences and perspectives were respected and valued. This trip was the culmination of weeks of preparation through informal contacts between the capacity builders and the participants. In short, we demonstrate that, if certain conditions are met, autonomy *can* be an outgrowth of a feminist capacity development program. In contrast to much development scholarship, which regularly generalizes women's experiences or essentializes women of the global South (Mohanty, 1988; Abu-Lughod, 2008), we stress the contextual nature of women's experiences and view women as autonomous agents whose identity is bound up with their families and communities.

## 2. Revisiting capacity development and autonomy

Capacity development approaches have evolved over the years from traditional/"narrow" (Venner, 2015), concentrating on individual organizational skill development to those that focus on systems or clusters of organizational skills and inter-organizational networks (Blagescu & Young, 2006). The latter include more "expansive" (Venner, 2015) approaches stressing the interdependencies of social actors in capacity development and participatory approaches emphasizing the relevance of ownership and the participation of the community (Lavergne & Saxby, 2001). With changes in organizational structures and the emergence of intermediary organizations and development initiatives aiming for more sustainability, capacity development has also undergone shifts and adaptations (Sanyal, 2006; Wetterberg, Brinkerhoff, & Hertz, 2015). Recent techniques/methods recognize that capacity development is not just about the event, goal, or output, but also involves processes and relationships (Bolger, 2000; Brinkerhoff, 2008; Girgis, 2007).

The goals of capacity development approaches vary depending on whose capacity they seek to develop—that of the individual, the organization, or the community. These goals are often interconnected such that one cannot realize organizational or community capacities without developing individual capacities. Often, the

capacity developer's framing of the context and definition of the goal determines for whom the capacity development program is created (Antlöv, Brinkerhoff, & Rapp, 2010; Merino & Carmenado, 2012). "Transformation towards autonomous development" of those receiving assistance is one important goal of capacity development (Ellerman, 2002, p. 43). According to some development scholars (e.g., Ellerman, 2002), the central conundrum of development assistance is the difficulty of ensuring that the assistance actually advances autonomous action, rather than undermining or undercutting it. Most existing research has concentrated on clarifying the types of actions that can undermine or enhance autonomy in the context of aid and assistance. For instance, any type of "imposing or engineering change with externally supplied motivation" can undermine autonomy, but offering help on the basis of individuals' existing intrinsic motivations can enhance autonomy (Ellerman, 2002, p. 47). It has also been suggested that capacity development is about providing outside support to strengthen the "endogenous process" and that ownership should remain with the community, local organizations, or governments (Chambers, 1983; Eade, 1997; Kühl, 2009).

There is wide recognition of the unequal nature of relationships between the givers and receivers of assistance (Fechter, 2012; Hilhorst, Weijers, & Van Wessel, 2012). In capacity development, aid politics creates an unequal relationship between the capacity receiver and giver (Lopes & Theisohn, 2013), where the support provider decides which capacities require strengthening. There is also often an assumption that the receiver lacks the capability to assume ownership, making the relationship inherently unequal, which has direct implications for autonomy (Lopes & Theisohn, 2013).

The tension between capacity development and autonomy has been partially addressed through participatory approaches to capacity development, grounded in the conscious awareness of potential problems regarding autonomy (Maguire, 2006). The participatory critique initially centered on dependency relationships and the need to strengthen capacities that enable communities to assess their realities and take action (Frank, 1973; Freire, 1970; Kindervatter, 1979). These critiques generated several alternative ways of understanding capacity development that involve reflection on personal journeys, relationships, and empathy, rather than viewing development merely as systems and management techniques with a "rational" basis (Breytenbach & Hughes, 2014; Eade, 1997, 2007; Tandon, 1981). Participatory approaches take the starting point that capacities can be developed or strengthened by recognizing participants' existing strengths (Eade, 2007), acknowledging the power of communities to resolve their problems rather than relying on external support or aid (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). Participatory approaches emphasize relationships over skills, acknowledging kinship, social, and associational networks by recognizing their contribution to activating formal institutional resources.

Unfortunately, participatory approaches have thus far given little attention to gender. In fact, as Maguire (1987) has pointed out, women's narratives are almost missing from several participatory capacity building approaches. Feminist perspectives can add significantly to the participatory capacity development literature. Feminist transnational networks, in particular, have been attentive to critiques of capacity development, using them to fashion more intentionally egalitarian collaborations (Chambers & Kymlicka, 2002). This article demonstrates how feminist perspectives can bring new insight into how autonomy comes to be defined for individual women in capacity development partnerships.

### 3. Feminist approaches to capacity development

Feminist approaches are driven by a diverse set of perspectives, and the notion that "feminism is fixed, monolithic and predictive of women's lives" (Maguire, 2006, p. 60) has been problematized in the work of many feminists. Different feminist perspectives share the understanding that, despite differences among them, women face oppression and exploitation, but perspectives differ in how they explain this social fact. Most feminist capacity development programs—irrespective of their differences in methods or theoretical basis—aim to challenge the forces and structures of gender-based oppression.

Feminist researchers have highlighted the gendered nature of capacity development, considering that women and young girls in many countries cannot access capacity development training (Eger, Miller, & Scarles, 2018; Gilbertson & Sen, 2017). Relatedly, feminists engaging development practice have argued that any sustainable capacity development program must incorporate equal opportunities for all (e.g., Sarapura, 2008). Additionally, they have asserted that superficial skill building should be replaced with facilitation of the ability to critically understand the "dynamics of oppression" and "internalized oppression" because it is the systems of oppression that restrict marginalized groups' participation in formal and informal decision making (Rowlands, 1995). In a feminist approach, capacity development is seen as "intrinsically connected to an individual's real freedom in such a way that they can define their own preferences" (Sarapura, 2008, p.2). Feminist capacity development thus attempts to produce women (and men) who can articulate a systemic critique of gender inequality and use that to renegotiate their own lives. It is also designed to produce empowered subjects able to use their voices and position as representatives to advocate for specific public goods. In this context, feminist capacity development engages questions of power and challenges power distribution at multiple levels.

Similarly, scholars embedded in development praxis in India speak of feminist capacity development as a transformative experience. For instance, Batliwala and Friedman (2014) have described feminist capacity development as the development of "transformative feminist leadership" skills by every individual, irrespective of their "role, position, power or status in the organisation" (p. 6). This highlights the participatory nature of feminist training, which is characterized by "no hierarchy between trainers and trainees, encouraging trainees to come to their own conclusions, the use of creative mediums such as theatre and song, and a focus on the personal" (Gilbertson & Sen, 2017).

Because feminist capacity development claims that it hopes to create a more egalitarian and inclusive approach through participatory processes, it is important to understand how the tension between capacity development and autonomy is addressed in theory and practice. Although other concepts that capacity development seeks to address, such as power and empowerment, are also important, relatively little attention has been directed toward the tension between capacity development and autonomy, compared with scholarship on power and empowerment (Collins & Rhoads, 2010; Crush, 1995; Rowlands, 1997). Nevertheless, in focusing on this tension, our work implicitly deals with notions of power that emerge in the relationship between the capacity developer and receiver as well as power relations in families and communities in which women and capacity development programs are embedded. As detailed in the following section, we argue that a particular feminist model of autonomy is useful here.

#### 4. Narrative autonomy

Most literature on capacity development in other contexts that engages the tensions with autonomy has been framed within the debate on aid-dependency politics (Bräutigam & Knack, 2004; Quadir & Orgocka, 2014). In such work, the relationship between capacity development and autonomy is seen through the lens of aid politics, suggesting a readymade script for developing capacities that is driven by an agenda far removed from the real-world requirements of the participants. Thus, this existing literature provides useful analyses but remains focused on “top-down” processes rather than engaging with the perspectives of those whose capacities are supposed to develop. In contrast, in the present study, we adopted a “bottom-up” perspective, focusing on the personal perspectives and experiences of participants in a capacity development program. This perspective allowed us to uncover how capacity development advances autonomy for both organizational workers and the “target” women, notwithstanding the fact that the program officially sought to advance formally scripted types of capacity.

Defining autonomy in individualistic terms—stressing capacity of will independent of social relations or context—has been found insufficient for understanding the full scope of autonomy (Benson, 1990; cf. Mahmood, 2005). Our preliminary findings indicated that both the CSOs and the participants engaged with the capacity development process in relational, context-embedded ways. In our effort to develop theoretical understanding to frame these preliminary findings, we found Williams (1997) model of narrative autonomy particularly useful. This model conceives of autonomy as embedded in relations and the social context, while simultaneously encompassing agency. The model centers on individuals’ narrative interpretations—revealing or creating meaning for oneself regarding one’s identity and situation, drawing on available materials but doing so with at least some creativity—and on how courses of action true to these interpretations are discerned. A number of capacities are necessary for narrative autonomy. The capacity for self-knowledge is required to decide which identity and life story will guide one’s actions. Narrative autonomy also requires self-esteem and self-trust, a willingness to rely on oneself, and thus a sense of one’s own competence. Normative competence—the power to reveal who we are in the context of others’ normative assessments of what we do—is also required. Social conditions can contribute to or hinder the development or exercise of these different capacities. The capacities of self-esteem and self-trust depend on recognition and responsiveness from other people, and thus on relations and interaction. The development of normative competence requires access to social environments in which the dominant evaluative systems in a society are taught and shaped. The capacity development process is self-reflective; therefore, the emergent autonomy is not defined by others but by individuals themselves (Williams, 1997). In the present study, we draw on this conceptualization of narrative autonomy to develop an understanding of how informal processes can advance autonomy and, at least in part, help to address the tension between capacity development and autonomy described above. In this way, the study foregrounds narrative autonomy as a conceptual foundation for capacity development.

We also seek to do justice to the complexity of women’s conditions, and we show that the process of narrative autonomy is not linear. As participants construct their own narratives, they are engaged in a complex series of negotiations. They must contend with opposition not only from their families and communities, but also from their own internalized expectations and experiences, and our analysis illustrates the convoluted nature of the development of narrative autonomy.

#### 5. The organizations, program, and methods

The studied CSO was a Delhi-based feminist human rights organization working to advance women’s and girls’ rights as well as the sexual and reproductive rights of all people. Over the years, this CSO has conducted several capacity development training programs for young girls and women so that “they can analyze the social power structures that disempower them.” According to an internal document, these programs seek to “shift the way people think and influence the way they act both within organizations and movements.” The CSO’s training sessions include a wide range of activities encouraging participants to share their experiences for critical reflection. The training sessions usually last two to three days, and most sessions in the capacity development program we studied in detail were held in Ranchi (Jharkhand’s capital city). Each program has a diverse set of objectives and participants. Most of the training shares the approach of facilitators from the feminist organization familiarizing participants with complex aspects of gender. This is accomplished through activities including roleplaying exercises, situational analysis, pictorial representation, theater, and cinema. Subjects such as patriarchy, sexuality, and women’s health are also covered in most of the workshops.

As suggested by one of the CSO’s former directors in a training manual, “the idea is never to give them answers but to rattle up their minds.” The CSO does this through feminist mentorship, training institutes, and training the trainers, and through knowledge exchange, internships, and sharing technology to develop capacities.

In recent years, the CSO built partnerships with *panchayat* (village council) organizations across different states, including Jharkhand, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh, to develop the capacities of these organizations and, through them, the capacities of young girls and women. We chose Jharkhand as our case site for this study because the CSO had more partners (seven) in this state than in Bihar or Uttar Pradesh, where it was conducting similar capacity development programs. Working with these seven partners, who were spread over four districts, allowed us to do justice to the diversity of the types of partner organizations and contexts that commonly exist in capacity development programs.

The Indian government’s policy of reserving seats for women in local government bodies (*panchayats*) has facilitated women’s election but not their actual participation. *Panchayats* were expected to become vehicles for women to become a part of the local decision-making structure because *panchayats* have the power to make financial and infrastructural decisions related to their own villages. After finding that women representatives’ participation was shallow, despite the 50% quota for women in *panchayat* bodies, the studied CSO decided to develop the capacities of elected women representatives, in partnership with the *panchayat* organizations. A number of scholars have explored the promise and limits of this kind of quota-based representation (Ban & Rao, 2008; Krook, 2006; Kudva, 2003; Pande, 2003), with mixed results regarding elected women representatives’ ability to advance policies preferred by women. The capacity development program examined in this study was designed to train the staff of each partner organization along with two elected women representatives to participate substantially in their roles as leaders in the *panchayat* governance. In Jharkhand, an initial set of trainees was then to become trainers for other elected representatives in their districts, creating a chain of trainers and trainees. An important goal of the training was to develop participants’ understanding of gender constructions and patriarchy, which often hinder women’s achievement of their “strategic interests” through representation (Jayal, 2006, p. 15). As part of the program, the elected representatives were sensitized to issues that affect the well-

being of women and girls, such as gender-based violence, and provided with the skills and support to raise these issues in the panchayat governance through what a training module termed “positive transformations.” The capacity development program took place through a series of training sessions held over three years for elected representatives in four districts of Jharkhand.

Our entry point to the field was the studied Delhi-based CSO. We were introduced to the seven local partners in a meeting in Ranchi arranged by this CSO. This meeting allowed us to build rapport with the partners, which was crucial in our efforts to reach out to the elected women representatives for interviews.

Our data consisted of 60 in-depth interviews with women involved with the program, including the following groups: 1) staff members of the Delhi-based CSO; 2) the women heading the seven local partner organizations; 3) staff facilitators of the local partner organizations who were directly trained for the program; and 4) elected women representatives trained directly by the Delhi-based CSO and connected to the local partner organization in each district. The field research was conducted over a three-month period. Below is a table with detailed profile of women we have quoted in the findings section.

We found that the interview venue had a meaningful impact on the quality of the data collected. The interviews were conducted in a variety of locations (e.g., at local government offices, in the houses of interviewees, under trees in villages, or in our hotel rooms), depending on the availability of the elected representatives and local partner organization staff. The interviews conducted in private were the most detailed and informative.

The in-depth interviews helped us to understand the experiences, interpretations, and contexts of the program participants, which, in turn, allowed us to learn what autonomy meant for them and to clarify the dynamic between capacity development and autonomy. We sought to give ample space to the interviewees to speak freely, and we were aware that they might be made apprehensive by the facilitation of our entry by the Delhi-based CSO that funded the program. Therefore, this factor was downplayed in our interviews with staff facilitators and elected representatives, who did in fact regularly make critical comments regarding the collaboration among the CSOs involved, supporting our sense that the interviewees felt comfortable sharing their experiences. The data collection was conducted by the first author, who lived in Jharkhand for several years as a child; having an identity intrinsically attached to the state helped her to connect with the organizations and participants. Even more significantly, her identity as a woman, wife, and mother in the Indian context allowed her to relate to the interviewed women in multiple ways, although her privileged, urban, educated, upper-class identity distanced her from the realities narrated by the women. It was challenging for the first author to negotiate these multiple identities. Ethical issues emerged when she consciously decided not to share her status as an army wife with the study participants, particularly in areas with Naxal presence, where villagers were uncomfortable speaking to people related to security personnel. In analyzing the data in the present study, the second author, an Indian woman working in higher education in the United States, drew on her previous work on how assumptions about civil society often obscure the realities of power differentials between organizations and individuals. The third author approached the study mainly from a critical perspective rooted in expertise on the practices of Northern-based development donors and nongovernmental organizations, seeking ways to advance autonomy and Southern leadership in development and therefore keen to identify “development alternatives.” We acknowledge that our multiple, intersectional identities and subjectivities attached to them, in subtle yet significant ways, had an impact on the data collection and analysis.

The first author entered the field after a thorough exploration of existing literature on capacity development, partnership, and autonomy. However, she also approached the fieldwork with the conviction that the experiences of the women involved were to be the starting point for the study. Building her understanding through the dozens of interviews she conducted, she learned that relational dimensions were important and understudied. Subsequently, all three authors built their grasp of the key dynamics involved on this front. Inductive and deductive coding (with the help of Atlas.ti) were both used to identify these dynamics. During this effort to make sense of our data, we found that Williams’ theory of narrative autonomy was applicable and offered a new lens for understanding the interplay between capacity development and autonomy that we had tentatively identified. Thus, our theory emerged through abductive reasoning, seeking to develop an explanation for what we found, using an iterative back-and-forth process between our data and existing theory.

## 6. Findings: How feminist capacity development advanced narrative autonomy

This section makes four interconnected claims. First, informal processes turned out to be crucial for addressing the existing conditions and creating new conditions necessary to advance the autonomy of both the elected women representatives and the women staff members of the partner CSOs in a restrictive social context. We categorize these informal processes as a) the inclusion of the family in the process; b) the inclusion of the community through self-help groups; and c) relationship building between the trainers from local partner CSOs and the trainees. Second, these informal processes allowed the elected representatives to negotiate their time and mobility, the essential conditions for attending the training program. The local partner CSOs engaged with women *within* their own contexts, which advanced the process of capacity development in crucial ways. Third, the formal training, while partly focused on providing a basic understanding of the functioning of the panchayat, enabled participants to build self-confidence and trust and to be reflective and critical of patriarchal practices and of their own life journeys as women. Fourth, together, the informal processes and participatory training approach helped to advance the participants’ narrative autonomy—their reinterpreting and reshaping of their identities and actions in their own contexts (see Fig. 1).

We would like to add here that the advancement of autonomy we observed was relative in nature and not linear. Below, we identify the limits of what was achieved in the form of backlash that the women faced when attending the capacity development program. The findings also show how capacity development in contexts where women’s roles are severely constricted is bound to be a long-term process.

### 6.1. Understanding and engaging with the context

The Delhi-based CSO developed their capacity development program to counter the marginality of women in local government in Jharkhand. In doing this, the CSO and its local partners also astutely engaged with the conditions of marginality their “target” women faced that stood in the way not only of their roles as elected women representatives, but also of their capacity development. Below, we describe these conditions to show why the staff facilitators found it necessary to make informal processes an important part of capacity development. The staff facilitators engaged with the existing conditions and transformed these to enable the elected representatives to attend the formal training. Several of the elected women representatives were also staff mem-

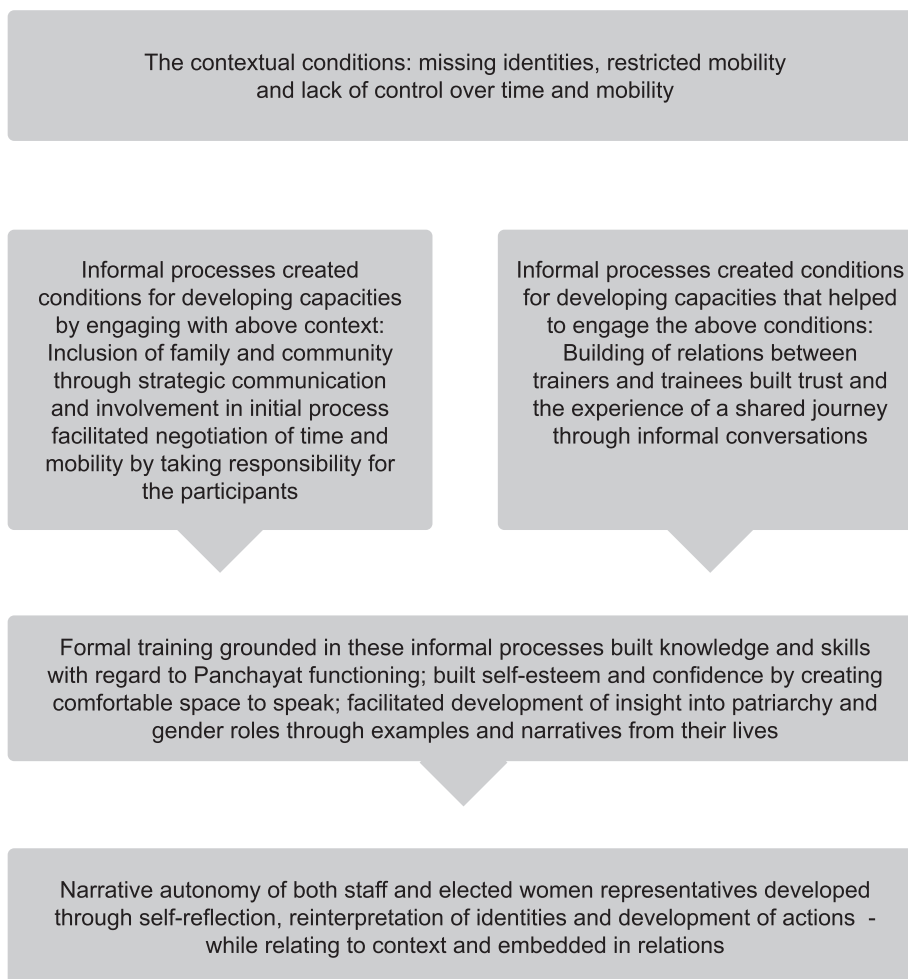


Fig. 1. Visualizing Narrative Autonomy through Informal Processes.

bers of local partner organizations and thus played the dual role of facilitators training the elected representatives and participants receiving the same training from the Delhi-based CSO. These facilitators were therefore part of the same contextual realities that they sought to interpret and transform. This allowed them to share their journeys together, becoming both the agency and the actors in the narrative autonomy we describe.

#### 6.1.1. Missing identities

Most of the elected women representatives suggested that they were elected as panchayat representatives because of the influence their family had in the village, an observation that is in line with previous findings (Jayal, 2006). These women were not aware of how the panchayat worked (cf. Chibber, 2002) and reported being panchayat members because their male family members wanted them to stand for election. To these women, this was unsurprising because, in their daily lives, they almost always followed the instructions of others and found that their opinions were usually dismissed (cf. Janssens, 2010). Their identity in the community and the village was linked to the male members of their families—their husbands, fathers-in-law, or sons. A description provided by Asha (see Table 1 for participant details) illustrates this idea:

The problem in villages is that many people do not know the real name of married women; she is known as someone's wife or after she gets married she is called by several nicknames like

*chutki* (the younger one), *badgi* (the elder one), [or] *manjli* (the middle one). This leads to people not knowing her real name. Even they forget their real names. It happened with one of the women who had to file her nomination for the panchayat elections. She had actually forgotten her real name as she was now called by some other name.

The women's lack of decision-making power within the household and their complete absence from public life restricted their active role in panchayat activities. Lack of mobility and of prior inexperience of decision making made it difficult for women to automatically assume substantial roles in panchayats.

#### 6.1.2. Restricted mobility

Most of the women who were elected as representatives, although they held different offices in the panchayat, had rarely stepped out of their homes unaccompanied. A statement offered by Meena reflects this restricted mobility:

Earlier, I was a housewife and did not have any idea about the outside world. I did not know anything else except for doing the household chores. In 2015 when the time came for the panchayat elections, my father-in-law suggested my name for the position of *Mukhiya* (village headman). I asked him, "How can I stand for the position of *Mukhiya*? No one knows me, and I have never been outside the home." Then my brother-in-law suggested that maybe I can start with being a regular panchayat

**Table 1**  
Profile of women we quote in the text.

Name of the Interviewee <sup>i</sup>	Age	Education <sup>ii</sup>	Staff Facilitator/Elected Representative/ Both	Occupation <sup>iii</sup>
Asha	26	Higher Secondary	Both	Staff of a local partner organization
Meena	23	Middle School	Both	Staff of a local partner organization
Neelam	35 (approximate age)	Middle School	Staff Facilitator	Staff of a local partner organization
Deepa	27	Under Graduation	Staff Facilitator	Middle level staff of a local partner organization
Nitu	30	Under Graduation	Both	Middle level staff of a local partner organization
Rita	37	Basic Reading and Writing	Elected Representative	Seasonal Agricultural Worker
Sudha	25	Higher Secondary	Elected Representative	Runs tailoring business from home
Sheela	36	Higher Secondary	Staff facilitator	Senior staff of a local partner organization
Mariam	40	Middle School	Elected Representative	Social worker
Pragya	30	Post-Graduation	Both	Staff of a local partner organization
Priya	25	Higher Secondary	Elected Representative	Social worker

<sup>i</sup> Names are changed for reasons of confidentiality.

<sup>ii</sup> Most women in our sample are well qualified.

<sup>iii</sup> All the women are engaged in household chores which is viewed as their primary job.

member and stand for that. They knew some people in the village and based on that garnered support for me, and I was elected unopposed from my village.

Not all women participating in this capacity development program faced mobility restrictions, however. In East Singhbhum, the majority of the population belong to indigenous groups, and women's mobility is not constrained in these communities.

These interview extracts also suggest that the women had internalized oppression, with self-doubt regarding taking on public roles emerging from lacking identity, mobility, or control over time (systematic forms of oppression). They were "systematically denied power" and "influence in society" (Rowlands, 1997), which resulted in them internalizing societal expectations. Therefore, it was unsurprising that they were reluctant participants in local governance. The dynamics of oppression were deeply rooted, and capacity development at the informal level provided a way to negotiate these dynamics to make the women's participation in public/formal space possible. Participants' complex responses to feminist consciousness raising show that there is no linear path to internalized patriarchy.

### 6.1.3. Lack of control of time

Linked to women's restricted mobility was their lack of control over their own time. Irrespective of whether women went out of the home or not, they had to complete all of the household chores. Most families consisted of six or more members, with the entire burden of all household chores often falling on young women. This burden was sometimes shared by older female family members but never by male family members because of patriarchal norms. Women never had time for anything beyond their household duties. This was a primary constraint for the elected women representatives, as it impeded their active participation in the panchayats and in any formal training that required dedicated time. Neelam, a local partner organization staff member, articulated this when asked about the greatest challenge facing this group of women:

Given our context, it is extremely difficult to find time, as often we are so engrossed in taking care of everyone at home. The entire day and a substantial part of the evening for us go to doing household chores, and, therefore, when we go and call the women for training, it is only natural that they find it difficult. Many of them have to work in the fields as well, serving as an extra hand, because labor from outside turns out to be very

expensive. We understand their problems as we are a part of this reality and live it every day.

This statement is important in two ways. First, it reflects the challenge that the staff members faced in motivating the women representatives to participate in the formal training. Second, the staff members repeatedly mentioned "our context" and interchangeably used terms like "our" and "their." The social context of the capacity development program participants was similar to that of the local partner staff facilitators, who lived in the same community. This shared context allowed them to build relationships with the elected representatives; unlike other capacity development providers, these facilitators were not "outsiders" and they did not devise instruments or tools to build these relationships (Girgis, 2007). Instead, relationships were unplanned and built over time.

Context-related conditions were addressed through informal processes facilitating women representatives' participation in the formal training. The training process involved a journey for both the staff members and the elected representatives, which helped them to bond, share their experiences, and, to a certain extent, negotiate the transformation of their conditions.

### 6.2. Evolving informal processes: Relations

The formal capacity development training was designed by the Delhi-based CSO. However, this CSO could not design the informal processes for the local partner staff facilitators, who had to constantly strategize on the basis of the realities they faced on the ground. An example of this occurred in the early stages of the program, when the local partner staff members conducted surveys to gauge the willingness of elected women representatives to attend the training. Several staff members were unable to meet with the women representatives because these women's male family members came out and answered the survey questions in place of the women. It thus became clear early on that the elected women representatives' participation in the training program would not be possible without engaging with their families. This is one way the informal processes evolved for the local partners and their staff as the program progressed, with the CSO actively engaging with the context in which women were embedded. This helped to create conditions conducive to the development of narrative autonomy: a community in which self-esteem and self-trust—necessary preconditions for advancing women's sense of identity as autonomous

beings and reinterpretations of what their identities could be—could develop.

### 6.2.1. Involving the family

Their observations of the elected representatives' social contexts prompted the local partners and their staff members to establish a relationship with the representatives' families to facilitate the women's participation in the program. In situations where the family was already familiar with the local partner organization's work, it was much easier to persuade them to send the elected representative for the training. However, this was not the case for the majority of the participants. Sometimes, staff members had to sit for hours, engaging in conversation with a representative's family members. It was usually staff members who engaged in these conversations, but sometimes even the heads of the organizations would visit the field areas to speak with the families. These conversations became the building blocks for establishing trust between the families and the staff facilitators. This trust was essential to make it possible for the elected women representatives to travel out of the village to attend the training sessions with the local organizations' staff members. This was not an outcome achieved through one meeting with the family members; it required a continuous effort, patience, and dedication.

Communication with the families was conversational but strategized. First, the local partners were strategic in the information they divulged about the training. The facilitators always said the training was on functions related to the panchayats. They were careful not to reveal that the training also addressed gender relations and issues. The partners realized that it was too complicated to explain the importance of training on gender to the family members. Moreover, there was a high probability that learning the training addressed gender might lead the family members to decide against permitting the women representatives to attend. Second, to help secure women's continued participation, the facilitators sometimes kept channels of communication open with the family even after the elected representatives started coming for the training. Many of the staff facilitators were also women elected as members of panchayats and participants in the training program organized by the Delhi-based CSO. This provided an entry point for them to speak with the elected representatives' family members and a way for them to explain the importance of the training for these women, drawing on their own experience. The sharing of these experiences allowed women to be themselves, diffusing the power dynamics between the capacity developers and receivers. Here, the boundaries between the two groups were also blurred by their contextual similarity and the dual identities of several staff facilitators.

In addition, in almost all cases, the staff facilitators had to act as chaperones for the elected women representatives attending training sessions that involved travelling outside their villages. Engagement with the families also involved managing the involvement of male family members. The family (primarily male family members) initially insisted that they would accompany the women to every training session. The local organizations allowed this but respectfully asked them to wait outside the venue during the training, explaining that it was intended only for women representatives. After the first few training sessions, these family members stopped coming, and the women were allowed to come on their own. Engagement with the family members thus facilitated mobility and the negotiation of time for the elected women representatives. Eventually, these two factors became significant in creating new conditions for women that allowed them move outside their homes, engage in conversations with other women, share their views and capacity to develop independent thought and knowledge, and "seek value in their own knowledge" (Foucault, 1979, p.25).

### 6.2.2. Establishing connections through self-help groups

Every village in the four districts had self-help groups, and a few community women were active members of these groups. In these self-help groups, which are similar to the micro-credit groups found elsewhere (Chowdhury, Ghosh, & Wright, 2005), women came together informally to address some of their common problems. Many of the women participating in these self-help groups regularly communicated with different groups in their village. They therefore had close ties with many of the people in the village, which allowed them easy access to the elected women representatives and their families. The staff facilitators of the local organizations strategically used this access and developed their own capacities to take decisions within the informal space.

In some cases, the staff members of the local organizations had relatives or friends in the self-help groups, who communicated with the families of the elected representatives or the women representatives themselves on behalf of the staff facilitators. The self-help group members became informers, communicators, and even mediators for the staff facilitators of the local organizations involved in this capacity development program. This built close relationships among the elected women representatives, self-help group members, and local organization staff members. In some cases, a self-help group member was also a panchayat member and had even better access to the elected women representatives. Deepa, a staff facilitator, summed up the role of the self-help groups as follows:

They are informers and information sources for the organization. They pass on information about the training and also tell the organization if there are any major issues in the area, particularly related to women. They try to organize meetings in case of issues of domestic violence. The organization normally provides outside support to the elected women representatives in such cases and discusses issues with them, giving them suggestions so that they can take an informed decision on a particular issue.

An important element of the close ties among these three groups was their shared context. They all understood that they had to work toward facilitating elected women representatives to have the time and mobility necessary to participate in any type of training. Their shared understanding helped them relate to each other, easily paving the way for emotional bonds to emerge. The informality of these relationships built trust, distributed responsibilities and in the process, they also exchanged a few skills with each other. These findings have been articulated by similar studies on relationship building in the context of volunteering work in other settings (Aked, 2015). These relationships always kept the channels of communication open between the staff facilitators and the elected representatives. We found that trust evolved among these groups over the course of the program.

### 6.2.3. Relations between facilitators and elected women representatives

After the staff facilitators and elected women representatives started going to Ranchi for trainings, a strong bond evolved between these groups. While travelling together, they talked about their happy moments and shared their problems and miseries, which brought them closer to each other. These informal relationships outside the formal training space were important in building trust between the two groups. They became each other's support structure. The elected representatives often reached out to the staff facilitators for advice on panchayat issues. When cases of domestic violence or sexual harassment came before the elected representatives, they consulted the staff facilitators. Staff facilitators also met with the elected representatives or spoke with them by telephone



when no training was scheduled. These relationships made the training process a shared experience for both the staff facilitators and the elected representatives.

The staff facilitators faced their own set of challenges at home when they participated in out-of-town training sessions. The shared context that both groups of women faced made it easier to relate to each other and to establish a connection. These informal relationships allowed the elected women representatives to negotiate their time and mobility for the formal training and to develop capacities such as the power to act collectively to transform their conditions, even if it was only for a brief period of time.

#### 6.2.4. Relationships created the necessary conditions for narrative autonomy

The relationships and trust among the staff facilitators, elected women representatives and their families, and self-help group members helped to create the necessary conditions for the participants to attend the training sessions. This was a small but potentially significant step toward autonomy, allowing these women to communicate with others outside their families and communities. They were able to gather and speak about their problems and get a different perspective on them. These relations were not designed into the training but came about as the local organizations understood and engaged with other women in their shared context.

These informal conversations made space for the elected representatives to reflect and to better value and understand their lives. Many participants' narratives suggested that they looked forward to these meetings and conversations. They did not view the training as a burden, even though they had to finish their work at home before being able to leave. Rather, the training was something they were doing for themselves, "a choice that allowed them to experience freedom" (Sen, 2000, p.31) in a specific context. The journey from their homes to the training space gave them an opportunity to own the process as they engaged in different types of conversation, developed bonds with their trainers and the other participants, and shaped the process in a way that was beyond the design formulated by the Delhi-based CSO. They also wanted to bring other women representatives along on this journey and helped the staff facilitators to build connections with others. Thus, a chain slowly developed, bringing a sense of purpose and a new understanding of possible identities to the women involved in the process.

#### 6.2.5. Formal training: Facilitating the narrative construction of identity

When the elected representatives gained autonomy and experienced an increase in mobility, allowing them to attend the training sessions, many were exposed to new ideas. They heard some of the presented concepts and views for the first time. Expressing their opinions and experiences gave them the confidence to speak outside the confined space of their homes. The Delhi-based CSO had designed a participant-driven training schedule. They were asked to share experiences from their lives, describe their daily chores, and share how they viewed themselves. Most of them had never before spoken in front of strangers and were immediately uncomfortable. Therefore, to put them at ease, the trainer shared her own experience of how she felt about being a woman, building connections on an equal basis. Nitu, a staff facilitator and a panchayat member, shared the following thoughts about the training:

I joined the organization in 2016 and attended four trainings from the (Delhi-based CSO) in that same year. The first training was on describing circumstances. Everyone had to speak about their circumstances. I really liked this idea because there is hardly a platform where we get to share our experiences. It was good to see that a lot of women were like me and were

willing to share their experiences with everyone. But, yes, not everyone was comfortable with the idea in the beginning. It was only after a few sessions that everyone could open up.

Participants thus found that, in the capacity development program, someone listened to them and then linked their experiences to the broader social structures in which they were located. Their experiences were thus given meaning, and this was significant because they felt that a larger issue was linked to what they were experiencing. They identified the main larger issue as patriarchy (*pitrissatta* in Hindi). Patriarchy was viewed as a key constraint to gender equality, and the participants understood patriarchy and gender through their own life experiences. The women felt freedom through speaking, being listened to, and connecting through meaning making. In the training program, participants were introduced to concepts such as gender and patriarchy through their own life experiences.

During the training sessions, the women could say whatever they wanted or even sing if they were anxious about talking. The trainers attached value to every narrative. No experience was viewed as meaningless. Over time, this helped participants gain more confidence and understand that their voice carried weight. Rita, one of the participants, described this as follows:

The most important thing that the training has given me is the fact that I am able to speak to you with so much confidence. Earlier, I could never think of this as a possibility. I remember, the first time when the trainer from Ranchi came to meet me, I would only speak succinctly and give one-word answers. I was worried about how she would interpret what I said, and I was never confident about my articulation.

The training program also addressed the functioning of the panchayat and the women's own roles and responsibilities in that system. Although many of the women had lacked the confidence to speak during panchayat meetings, after the training, they began to try. A basic understanding of the panchayat functioning made it possible for them to be less dependent on their family members and to take on work related to their panchayats. This significantly changed how the participants perceived themselves as individuals. After the training, many felt that they could confidently take on the male representatives in panchayat meetings. Several elected representatives said that they were previously not even aware of the different types of panchayat meetings, and the training helped them to understand this. After the women became aware of the panchayat rules and scope, it became easier for them to organize themselves to build a voice for the issues they wanted to raise. This does not mean that the women representatives immediately started raising "women's issues" in panchayat meetings. However, they were able to question practices lacking legal standing. For instance, in many of the panchayats, they questioned policies that were approved without the signatures of the women members and called out this practice as against the rules.

#### 6.3. Formal training and critical reflection on gender roles

A central aspect of the formal training program was to introduce the concepts of gender and patriarchy to the participants and to relate these concepts to the women's everyday experiences. This helped the participants to understand that some everyday experiences that they viewed as normal or natural were actually socially constructed. The elected representatives and staff facilitators asserted that, although the women had previously been aware of the inequalities that existed in their lives and the lives of other women, they had viewed these simply as part of everyday life; it was something that women had to undergo. Sudha, an elected representative, described the change in mentality as follows:

Attending the sessions in the training helped me understand that there was nothing normal about the everyday inequalities and abuse [women] underwent. We first had to realize that this is constructed by the society and endorsed by everyone.

Self-reflection was an integral part of the training process. For example, as part of the training, the Delhi-based CSO staff members asked the participants to respond to simple prompts, such as “Narrate an incident when you felt someone dominated you” or “What are the advantages or disadvantages of belonging to a caste?” These prompts made the participants reflect on their own identities and experiences and relate them to broader concepts such as gender and patriarchy. For instance, many participants began to question certain practices that were specific to women and that men did not have to follow. Sheela, a staff facilitator, described her own experience with the training in the following way:

I have to constantly explain why I do not wear any ornaments, as other women do. I never liked wearing any jewelry, but earlier I used to think that I am not normal and had self-doubt about my actions. Now, I know that it is a patriarchal practice to force women to wear so much jewelry, especially after marriage. I still do not wear any jewelry and don't explain anything to anyone. I know I am not wrong.

Many participants said the training made them reflect on the different roles they had to play and how this was often not by choice but because playing these roles was expected of them. This reflection did not mean that the women representatives were automatically able to substantially change their own roles in the household or those of other women in the broader community. However, the realization did help them to critically reflect on their own life journeys. For instance, Mariam, an elected representative, described the following situation:

I was trapped in an abusive marriage for several years. The training did not change my situation at home, but it gave me a reason to step out of my home as often as possible and thus escape the abuse. It gave me an excuse to go out, and this mobility gave me a sense of freedom, even if it was for a short period.

These narratives indicate that the program facilitated narrative autonomy in several ways through encouraging participants to reflect on their lived experiences. The training allowed them to find meaning in these experiences and to view them critically in new ways.

The element of self-reflection was embedded not only in the formal training process but also in the informal relationships that the women built with each other. These relationships helped to develop the practice of critical reflection among the participants by building a community in which identities could be reflected on and reinterpreted. They heard stories of resistance and of acceptance of oppression, allowing them to view their own realities through a new lens.

### 6.3.1. Identity and action: Building more autonomous selves

The advancement of narrative identity involves an intricate interplay between interpretation and action. The self-esteem and self-trust that the women built socially in engagement with their families and communities played an important part in enacting new roles that could develop through the capacity development process.

After the training, a number of elected women representatives started attending the panchayat meetings for the first time. The primary reason for this change was that they now understood the importance of these meetings and how their presence could

help the panchayat to make decisions collectively and more inclusively. Gradually, many of the elected representatives started to take part in resolving panchayat issues such as facilitating pension schemes for older people through the block office or securing contracts for building public toilets. Several elected representatives said that they started going to the local development administration office more frequently to understand how they could access the schemes available for the villagers. For the elected women representatives, taking charge of their own work was an empowering experience. Pragya, an elected representative who also worked as a facilitator for one of the partner organizations, described her experience with this change as follows:

Initially, my father-in-law would meet everyone who used to come to meet me. But, over a period of time, after I understood everything, I gradually ensured that I met people directly. My family wanted to use me as a rubber stamp, but since I was educated and because of the training, I took charge of my own work.

The transformation was individualistic in the sense that the elected women representatives developed a stronger awareness of their own identity. In another sense, it was relational because this development had an impact on the space women occupied in their families and communities. The changes helped them to create a status of their own within the community and, through that, also in their own families. Many staff facilitators trained by the Delhi-based CSO said that their relations with family members changed after they went away for the training sessions. These women said their family members experienced a greater amount of respect in the community and were even identified as the relatives of these women because of the work the representatives had done. For instance, Priya, an elected women representative, said, “My family realized that they were getting so much respect in the village because I was doing good work.”

Women also shared how, while they were away for the training, their husbands took on the responsibility of doing household chores and caring for the children. This had never happened before for most of the women. The change was temporary and only while the women were away. Nevertheless, they viewed the change as important and valuable because many participants had never conceived of such role reversals. This study did not collect the data necessary for a more detailed analysis of how these reversals eventually impact gender roles in the community, but this is a potentially fruitful area for further research. The changes we observed suggest that, for these women, autonomy was uniquely embedded in their “interpersonal and social environment” (Christman 2004, p. 150; see also Williams, 1997; Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000).

In combination, formal training about the panchayat and dialogue about gender helped to build women's capacity to reflect on their identities, reinterpret these, and reshape their actions on the basis of a newfound capacity to claim their authority within the panchayat. The autonomy the women experienced suggests that feminism must move beyond seeing agency as, “resistance to relations of domination, and the concomitant naturalization of freedom as a social ideal” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 39). The construction of narrative autonomy by the women in Jharkhand did not make them “freer” through the rejection of family and community norms. Rather, they became more themselves through negotiating power within the context of their families and communities. Thus, the formal training did not liberate these women, but they were transformed through the choice to participate in the training and the process of getting there.

The building of autonomy was certainly not linear. When these women decided to defy norms, they gained a sense of autonomy, but they were also challenging the core patriarchal practices of

their society. This brought several new obstacles for the participants, and many faced backlash from their communities and family members. An elected representative from Chatra district shared her distressing experience. Her husband had stopped answering her calls when she went away for a training session after he had denied her permission to go. He did not speak to her for several days, and eventually their conflict became known in the community. She had to seek help from the local partner organization to clarify the reason for her travel. Another elected representative faced backlash from the community after she attended a training session in the city. Her neighbors claimed that she had gone on a recreational trip with unrelated men under the pretext of attending a training program. She had to seek help from the Delhi-based CSO, which sent pictures from the training program to prove its authenticity and to confirm that it was an all-women program.

The autonomy that participants experienced came with constraints, as the transformation in the conditions of their lives remained limited. Naina, a staff facilitator and elected representative, described this difficulty as follows:

I have on a number of occasions wanted to leave the job and sit at home. This is not because I do not enjoy my work but because of the pressure I experience at home. When I have to do all the household chores and still people at home are not satisfied, coupled with a bad day at work, that accentuates such feelings. I rationalize that there is still so much to understand and learn. When I look at my trainers from [the Delhi-based CSO], I also want to be like them and speak with similar confidence.

This statement highlights the constant dilemma faced by the participants, who often tired of the negotiation required in their quest to gain knowledge and to work for the community. It also shows the limits to narrative autonomy that may emerge in the context of capacity development, even when led by CSOs that are sensitive to power differences. There is the aspiration to define a self-identity, but there is also the tendency to define it by emulating someone else. The indication that the program led women to wish to be like the trainer from the Delhi-based CSO instead of finding confidence in their own identity suggests that the advancement of narrative autonomy was limited. The space given to the participants is what made this program contextually embedded. The Delhi-based CSO tried to build these women's capacities to make them more confident, strengthen their voices, and connect their experiences to gender inequality. As we have demonstrated, this was achieved to some extent in the formal training space, but a large part of this process unfolded outside the training space through a process of building relationships and shared journey.

## 7. Conclusions

Combined, formal and informal processes created conditions that facilitated the development of women's capacities to reshape their identities. Women built new ideas of who they could be, rooted in the reflections that the capacity development program facilitated through informal and formal processes. These women were also able to begin to perform actions rooted in these new interpretations, gaining autonomy in terms of mobility, time, voice, and space. This process was embedded in multiple relations—between the women and their families and communities, between the women and the chosen community of trainers and participants, and between CSOs and communities. Informal processes that engaged sensitively with the women's social contexts made it possible for them to enter and become part of new communities in which they could reflect on their identities, whereas the formal training helped to offer new roles in which these identities could be enacted. In the women's narratives, they crafted an autonomy

about freedom *within* the context of their homes, villages, and communities. As they did not seek to escape these boundaries, autonomy was both relational and contextual for them. These women worked to refashion their room to maneuver within existing boundaries. The workings of the capacity development process, as well as the type of autonomy that developed, suggest that narrative autonomy, rather than autonomy defined in individualistic terms, is a suitable model for how capacity development can advance women's autonomy—at least in contexts such as Jharkhand, where women's roles are largely defined in social, gendered terms. This does not mean that a more individualistic autonomy would not be of interest to these women; it rather suggests a place to start with capacity development under existing, real-world conditions.

As we have seen in this study, these dynamics can develop even when capacity development is structured around a script—a set of understandings of which capacities are to be built and how this should be done. It is essential to approach capacity development in a way that advances autonomy through reinterpretations of lived experiences. This implies engaging with participants as embedded in their social context and relations, as well as developing strategies to connect with women, their relations, and their contexts. This finding on the importance of engaging women in the global South as both autonomous agents and persons embedded in the context of their communities is itself a notable contribution of this paper. This understanding moves us beyond decontextualized generalizations about all women or caricatures of “third-world women” who are wholly defined by tradition.

We conclude that capacity development can approach the tension in relation to autonomy in two interrelated ways. First, it can engage the participants in an informal space, recognizing the importance of their social context. Organizations seeking to contribute to women's capacity development may include analyses of women's social contexts as part of program development, also acknowledging the need to reserve resources for informal processes. Second, based on this understanding of women's embeddedness in their contexts, capacity development programs can approach autonomy as narrative and support the development of this autonomy through program design.

This study was in itself of course embedded in the context of Jharkhand, which shaped the development of our understandings in important ways. However, women's embeddedness in social contexts is universal, and there is reason to believe that the main insights on informal processes and narrative autonomy, as well as their interconnection, are valid for many contexts. We welcome further exploration.

In the present work, we move beyond problematizing the aid-dependency power relations often seen in capacity development programs (Eade, 2007; Rowlands, 1997). We suggest that power is intrinsic to capacity development because of both the different contexts in which CSOs and participants operate and the tension between the roles of capacity giver and receiver. Approaching capacity development in this way makes it possible to build on existing participatory approaches that view capacity development as occurring through relationships and informal processes. A feminist capacity development program taking a participatory approach can respect the differences in contexts between the participants and the capacity developers. At the same time, sensitive engagement can encourage informal bonds to emerge between the facilitators and the participants—perhaps more easily when they come from relatively similar contexts. This is something that happens outside the training space, diffusing the tension between the facilitators and the participants and allowing them to enter the formal training space. In addition to having clear practical implications, our findings make a theoretical contribution by suggesting a contextually embedded approach to capacity development that

makes it possible for participants to experience narrative autonomy and build new identities and a new social role.

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