

Hairdressing, sewing, cooking - do NGOs really think this will empower women?

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Women's empowerment has long been a development buzzword, but a narrow focus on getting women into low-paid work may be marginalising them further

In the blue tent on the building site that forms Noora Murat Khalaf's home, the shiny new sewing machine is incongruous, to say the least.

The Yazidi family have been living here since they fled Islamic State in 2014. In those three years, they've tried their best to make the building site in Erbil a bit more homely: cushions line the perimeter inside the tent, and outside a couple of old sofas sit amid the bricks.

Life in Erbil, in northern [Iraq](#), is expensive and it is difficult to find work, so the family survive primarily on charity. "We have no power, no money, no rights," says Khalaf, sitting in her tent. "If we could work, we wouldn't need anything from any NGO - but there is no work for us."

The sewing machine was given by an NGO, as part of a women's empowerment programme. Along with a cohort of other displaced Yazidi and Christian women, Khalaf completed a short course in tailoring, learning to sew alongside lessons on business skills.

At first, she was optimistic about the opportunity. She enjoyed the course and hoped it might lead to an income. But in the year since she finished the programme, it has proved impossible to earn money from the sewing machine. "People here in Erbil usually buy their clothes from shops ready-made," she says. "Yazidi people like traditional tailored clothes, but all the Yazidis here are also refugees, so they have no money." Occasionally, she mends her family's clothes or those of neighbours - for free - but otherwise the machine is unused.

Women's empowerment is an idea that has gained enormous currency in the world of international development over the past two decades. Originating in feminist movements in the global south, an "agenda for women's empowerment" was first adopted by the UN in 1995. Although initially the idea referred to a host of political and legal changes to address gender parity, the focus of these programmes soon narrowed in on efforts to help women into work, and to counter violence against women and girls.

Today, virtually every international aid organisation includes empowerment programming. It is a buzzword for fundraising, with billions of dollars going to these projects every year. But the term is vague: what exactly is meant by women's empowerment? And does it genuinely empower the women it is supposed to help.

A recent study by Kate Cronin-Furman, Nimmi Gowrinathan, and Rafia Zakaria entitled [Emissaries of Empowerment](#) questions the approach of "the modern empowerment paradigm, which takes an ostensibly apolitical, technocratic approach to improving the lives of women in the developing world". The study argues that focusing narrowly on economic prospects can be counterproductive.

"The elision of non-western women's politics is clearly on display in the one-size-fits-all deployment of sewing machines to solve every problem," the authors write. "This is especially unfortunate, because many of these women already inhabit a profoundly depoliticised context in which they are marginalised by the state and kept at a distance from the levers of power."

Many women's empowerment projects the world over focus on hairdressing, tailoring or cooking. This is in part because the barrier to entry is low, so these programmes are accessible to women who may not have had much formal education, and in part due to constraints on women – most of these jobs can be done in female-only environments or at home. There are different trends in different parts of the world, but most conform to this pattern: hair and beauty training in the Middle East, producing local handicrafts in Latin America and south Asia, giving women chickens to tend in rural India and Africa.

Undoubtedly, for some women, simply learning a new skill can be hugely valuable and confidence-boosting. But there is little hard evidence that these schemes actually help women to earn a living, or empower them in any meaningful sense.

Are they empowering women? Not really.

Mayssoun Sukarieh

"Are they empowering women? Not really," says Mayssoun Sukarieh, lecturer in Middle Eastern studies at King's College London. "First of all, many of these projects reproduce gender relations, so it's not about empowering women in the sense of making them equal. Secondly, this can work for a bit, but how much money is going to be generated by these tiny projects? Particularly when, at the same time, huge corporations are doing the same products at a very low price."

Empowerment means different things to different people. Amra al-Khadour, 38, is a Syrian refugee in Amman, the capital of Jordan. Originally from Homs, she is a trained engineer, who worked on designing roads and bridges before the war broke out. She left Homs with her three children after her husband, also an engineer, was killed. As for most refugees, it has been challenging for her to find work. She and her children are living at a charitable centre for Syrian widows.

Khadour is desperate to work, but is frustrated at the limited options available. "I was offered classes in sewing and catering. I took some of the classes, but it is not the kind of work I want to do, and I can't see how I could make a living by selling pickles," she says. Khadour looks emotional when she talks about her previous profession. "I wish I could work as an engineer here. If only. I think this will remain a dream." Whenever she can, she works as a private tutor, teaching children mathematics and science, but the pay is very low.

Sukarieh argues that there is a problem in the very construction of empowerment programmes. "It's telling women: this is your role, to cook and sew," she says. "If she was an engineer in Syria, this is not fulfilling her potential. Overall, the aim is not really empowerment. It's about telling women: stop depending on the public and the government, you can be your own boss. And of course, we can pretend it is really great, but it is not going to generate enough money, and it's not sustainable, and you don't have any social security."

In Erbil, Khalaf feels like giving up. "If we had money, we would leave to go abroad – but we don't have any way of getting the money. I enjoyed taking the tailoring course and I was proud to receive my certificate, but I still don't have any work. I am losing hope."

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P.S.

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