3 Power Relations, Participation, Empowerment, and Social Work

How Empowered Are Addressees Allowed to Become?

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3.1 Introduction

In social work theory and practice, the concept of empowerment serves as a fundamental goal that professionals strive to achieve. Indeed, empowerment has been included even in the global definition of social work (IFSW, 2014). Regardless of the various definitions that could be subsumed under the term empowerment, a common denominator is that social work promotes the flourishing of social participation by fostering an individual's self-determined ability to act within the framework of collective, interdependent responsibility (IFSW, 2014). When translating this very ambitious, and in part ambiguous, goal from a theoretical postulate into practice, several challenges arise. A particular aspect that will be explored further in this chapter is linked to the dimension of power. When exploring daily social work practices, a web of complexities surrounding power dynamics between social workers and addressees, the institutions, as well as the broader environment arise. In recognising that a holistic analysis of the various aspects would go beyond the limits of this chapter, I chose to focus on the particular aspect of the power relations between social worker and addressee, exploring in detail, by way of example, the implementation of new best practices in feminist social work practice within the institutionalised context of a women's shelter.

My activities as a social worker in a women's shelter, based in South Tyrol, northern Italy, included individual support for women and their children in situations of gender-based violence, as well as group work with the residents within the shelter in the spirit of community work, alongside public relations and awareness-raising efforts. Drawing on a two-year project on participation and empowerment that I implemented during my professional activity in the women's shelter, this chapter highlights the complexities that arise when social workers strive to redistribute power and collaborate 'at eye level'. This exploration aims to shed light on the fine line between empowerment and disempowerment (Watson, 2002), a tension that also resonates in the concept of participation, which can sometimes result in what is referred to as 'pseudo-participation' or tokenism (v. Unger, 2014). More specifically, I will address the invisible boundaries of participation and collaboration on equal

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footing, which, in turn, manifest as limits to empowerment. From a theoretical perspective, I will engage with the discourses surrounding the concept of 'othering' and show the fine line between supportive, empowerment practices and dynamics of 'us versus them' (Krumer-Nevo, 2021). As critically pointed out by Krumer-Nevo (2016), among others, I will discuss the importance of the awareness on power dynamics and mechanisms of othering in the context of social work to promote solidarity and empowerment.

This chapter reflects on the concrete experiences of implementing new practices that embrace empowerment and participation within a women's shelter. The initiative stemmed from a need to address various frustrations and resistances described in the next paragraphs. Although the new practices focused on small steps, they were viewed critically by some of my colleagues. Over the two years of implementation, I faced persistent resistance and rejection from part of the team. These discrepancies between the apparent success of the new approach and the resistance it faced led me to a deeper reflection on power and empowerment in social work.

The ReIncluGen project allowed me to analyse my practical experiences through the lens of the theoretical concept of situated intersectionality, which enabled a more holistic understanding of empowerment—capturing both its many facets and its procedural nature—and may further contribute to a context-sensitive, i.e. situated, understanding (Yuval-Davis, 2015). During the writing process I had the opportunity to revisit the newly introduced practices after six years, reconnect with former colleagues, and ask: What has happened in the meantime? Are there evident sustainable changes and development processes? This chapter will recount the development and implementation of these practices and address the following questions: What happens during the process of redistributing power to foster participation within a professional team? And how empowered are the addressees allowed to become?

3.2 Key concepts

Before delving deeper into the topic, it is important for me to clarify the meaning of the key recurring terms. This shared understanding serves as the foundation for comprehending and contextualising the following analysis. My aim is not to establish universally valid definitions, but rather to highlight the specific meanings these terms hold within the context of this discussion.

Empowerment: The term empowerment is often ambiguous and lacks a universally agreed-upon definition. According to Leonardsen (2007), empowerment can encompass either an individualistic or a relational perspective. In the ReIncluGen project, a holistic understanding of empowerment is adopted, encompassing social, cultural, economic, and gendered aspects analysed through an situated intersectional lens (Yuval-Davis, 2015). This perspective aligns with the roots of feminist thought on empowerment (Cornwall, 2016; Sardenberg, 2016). Thus, empowerment is framed as both

a personal capability and a challenge to existing power structures, aimed at fostering structural change and promoting greater equality (Sardenberg, 2016). This approach highlights both individual and collective dimensions of empowerment and, therefore, its relational elements by retaining a politicised meaning (Leonardsen, 2007). Moreover, empowerment is understood as an ongoing process, not a fixed state. As Cornwall (2016, p. 344) notes: *Empowerment becomes, within this perspective, an unfolding, iterative process that is fundamentally about shifts in power relations*. Ferguson and Lavalette (2004) emphasise the structural nature of alienation within a patriarchal, capitalist system, suggesting that empowerment must also address these larger systemic forces to be fully realised. Given the specific focus of this text, the broad concept of empowerment is primarily discussed as the ability to act, make conscious decisions, and shape relationships to rework the power imbalance between addressee and social workers. In this sense, the chapter highlights the empowerment of all those involved—social workers and addressees—while focusing on the relational aspects that are key to these processes of negotiating power.

Participation: Participation is a core concept applied within the approach presented in this chapter. Participation has become a term with almost inflationary use, and as a consequence, we often find it in contexts that stretch its meaning so extensively that it becomes quite distant from its original sense. This tendency can be observed, among other contexts, in both the theory and practice of social work. Almost every social worker embraces theoretically the concept of participation as a central element of their practice, regardless of its effective implementation. These critical reflections will guide us through the discussions provided in this chapter. Despite the broad and varied definitions present in theory and practice, throughout this chapter, participation is understood as the sharing and redistribution of power with the people social workers engage with. Therefore, participation extends beyond forms of compliant participation or directed consultation, as discussed by Unger (2014), or the forms of non-participation and tokenism addressed by Arnstein (1969). On the contrary, participation in this chapter embraces the potential for power distribution within an institutional context, in the sense of empowering actions that also grant decisional power. As shown by Boomkens et al., through participation people can acquire four central abilities: *a) directly influence the environment, b) learn new skills c) increase the social context and d) strengthen the sense of personal control* (Boomkens, Metz, Schalk, & Van Regenmortel, 2021, p. 227) This clear definition will help the reader further identify the limits of participation in the implementation of new practices.

Othering: The concept of othering along this text is used as a term to highlight the complexities that arise from social work's aim to understand and support 'the other', and the correlated risk of creating processes of dominance and control that push the person into an inferior position (Cremer-Schäfer, 2018; Krumer-Nevo & Sidi, 2012). This risk is particularly present

when the person belongs to a marginalised group, finds themselves in a vulnerable life moment, or when there are significant differences in background between social worker and addressee. Othering is associated with power dynamics present also in daily social work practice that shape the whole process of intervention and the relationship between social worker and addressee. Thus, along this text, othering is understood as: *the process of attaching moral codes of inferiority to difference, the critical discursive tool of discrimination and exclusion used against individuals on the basis of their belonging to marginalized groups* (Krumer-Nevo & Sidi, 2012, p. 300).

3.3 Developing new practices: analysing the problem

I worked as a social worker for over 13 years in a women's shelter, supporting women and children who survived gender-based violence. During this time, I developed new practices to strengthen the daily work following the principles of feminist social work, presented in the excursus (WAVE, 2004). The initiative discussed in this chapter stemmed from team frustrations about women's inconsistent participation in mandatory house meetings and lack of identification with the shelter, seen in behaviours like ignoring cleaning schedules or failing to secure the front door, essential for safety.

Despite choosing to live in the shelter voluntarily and being free to leave at any time,[1] women showed various forms of resistance. This led to the question: How could the team understand this resistance and transform it into constructive engagement, aligning with participation and empowerment goals?

Motivated to explore this, I examined alienation and power dynamics affecting women's control over their lives and daily shelter routines (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2004). My observations aligned with those of Gupta, Blumhardt, and ATD Fourth World (2018, p. 257), who noted that *resistance may be the only way families feel they can exercise power and agency*. I also drew from Boomkens et al. (2021) and their nine methodological principles to facilitate agency development: safety, meaningful relationships, acquaintance, positive motivation, needs orientation, boundaries, expanding lifeworld, talk, and social context. While developed for youth social work, these principles informed my work with adult women.

The newly developed project aimed to foster individual growth and community development. Its goals were: a) to transform resistance into constructive participation, b) to strengthen the sense of community within the shelter, and c) to empower women for future autonomy. Weekly house meetings were designed to enable residents to discuss communal matters and foster collaboration. These meetings remain dynamic and continually evolve in response to the changing composition of the group, varying interests, and linguistic barriers. Due to the group's heterogeneity and frequent turnover, both meeting schedules and participants often shifted. The efforts made to accommodate the women's needs —allowing for attendance alongside professional and caregiving responsibilities—represent a concrete translation of the concept

of situated intersectionality into social work practice, consistently creating space for diversity. Discussion topics ranged from practical communal issues to reflections on identity and community-building activities.

Over seven years, I observed four recurring issues:

a Staff members prepared the meeting agenda and briefly asked whether the women wanted to add any topics, but the women's engagement was often minimal, leading the staff to proceed with their agenda.
b Staff frustration grew due to inconsistent participation, leading to frequent staff changes in conducting the meetings.
c Women initially showed interest but after some time it changed and eventually mirrored staff frustration, often avoiding meetings with excuses.
d Conflicts over shared living arrangements, such as neglecting security measures like keeping the front door closed, highlighted women's limited identification with the shelter.

These insights highlighted the need for change and, in line with the feminist principles guiding the women's shelter, a participatory approach was adopted as the basis for this transformation. The approach aimed to enhance residents' identification with the shelter, reduce frustrations, and foster a sense of community.

3.4 Excursus: core principles of a feminist social work practice in running a women's shelter

Before presenting the new practice, it is important to provide general information about the structure of a women's shelter and the specific nature of feminist social work within such an environment. The guidelines for women's shelters are outlined in the manual 'Away from Violence' provided by WAVE (Women Against Violence Europe) (WAVE, 2004). A core aspect of a women's shelter is maintaining a balance between offering a safe and protected space for women and their children who have survived gender-based violence and avoiding an institutional environment that restricts their right to self-determination. Feminist, emancipatory, and empowerment practices are central to the work in women's shelters.

The main goals of a women's shelter can be summarised as protection, empowerment, and social change. The key principles of social work in women's shelters include: feminist analysis of violence against women, women supporting women, advocacy for women, teamwork and flat hierarchies, participation and democratic structures, the right to self-determination, confidentiality and anonymity, 24-hour service with no time limits on stays, diversity, accountability, professionalism, operation by non-governmental, non-profit, non-partisan women's associations, and the provision of free services.

In line with these goals and principles, residents in a women's shelter generally manage their daily lives independently. Each woman lives

autonomously with her children in a small apartment, engaging in activities that vary according to individual needs. Each woman receives support from a social worker or pedagogue to support rebuilding her life beyond violence. Children are similarly supported by a social worker or pedagogue to process their experiences and access further assistance if needed. Alongside individual support, there is a mandatory weekly event: the house meeting. It is important to keep these principles in mind when considering the challenges discussed later, as everyday social work practice can pose obstacles to their implementation.

3.5 Developing new practices: identifying key spheres for change

The new practice started with the aim of restructuring the weekly house meetings and to transform them into a pleasant and overall important and useful moment for all participants. I identified four key spheres to be addressed.

3.5.1 Reducing power imbalances—establishing a common ground

The weekly house meeting is a mandatory event; therefore, some women attend out of a sense of obligation rather than genuine personal interest. Moreover, a power imbalance exists between the residents and the staff members facilitating the meetings. This dynamic may inhibit women from openly expressing their needs, particularly regarding tasks they find unpleasant. The power asymmetries that shape these relationships may also prompt women to present themselves as overly eager to please the staff member, aligning their ideas and needs with perceived expectations. As such, managing power dynamics within the context of the house meeting remains a continuous challenge that must be consciously addressed in order to foster relationships based on equality. Relationships grounded in recognition—understood, following Krumer-Nevo (2021), as a fundamental and ongoing aspect of human experience—serve as a central means of establishing common ground. Full and open recognition of the other lays the foundation for a relationship built on trust.

3.5.2 Diverse life experiences and varied educational levels—creating a learning environment

Women in the shelter typically form a heterogeneous group, comprising individuals with vastly different life experiences as well as diverse educational backgrounds. As a result, participants in house meetings may range from academics to individuals with limited literacy skills. It is therefore essential to navigate and balance these varied backgrounds and communication abilities in order to foster an environment that encourages active participation from all. Furthermore, these meetings can serve as spaces for mutual learning and can support the empowerment and agency of (migrantised) women by

engaging with specific cultural contexts, educational trajectories, and more. In this context, an approach grounded in the concept of situated intersectionality facilitates the navigation of such diversity and complexity, becoming a consciously lived practice.

3.5.3 Cultural diversity and language barriers—building bridges

The residents include locals as well as women from various countries all over the world, each at different moments of their integration process. Some migrant women already have a broad knowledge of the local system, traditions, and language(s), while others who have been in South Tyrol for only a few months may, for example, lack proficiency in German or Italian, or in any European language that could serve as a communicative bridge. It is crucial to be aware of this diversity and to consequently rework strategies to convey participation also nonverbally.

3.5.4 Differences in personal well-being and stability—reinforcing mutual understanding

Women in a women's shelter go through different phases during their stay, and this diversity affects their willingness and ability to actively participate in shaping the house. Those in the initial arrival phase may find it difficult to focus on such projects, while women in acute crisis situations may struggle to allocate resources beyond their immediate safety concerns. Similarly, women preparing to leave may be less interested in internal house matters. Being aware of these dynamics and acknowledging that equal engagement is not always feasible for every woman is crucial to avoiding misunderstandings. This is where the importance of recognition and relationship-based knowledge (Krumer-Nevo, 2021), combined with a situated understanding, becomes evident in fostering dialogue and mutual understanding.

3.6 Power relations, participation, and empowerment: what happened within the staff

The starting point for redesigning the weekly house meetings was straightforward. I communicated my motivation to develop a new concept to my team and received unanimous approval. However, during the development process, it became clear that there was relatively little interest in engaging with the new ideas. It is important to note that staffing levels were generally tight, and employees were managing heavy workloads. Therefore, these reactions were not surprising, as I attributed them to two main motives: a) everyone was relieved to have passed on the "hot potato," and b) it was assumed that the new approach would not directly impact their daily work.

This initial situation granted me significant freedom to develop the concept, though I would have personally appreciated more interest from my

colleagues. Overall, the initial circumstances appeared positive, as there were no evident obstacles. However, the naivety of this assumption only became clear once the project was underway. In the following sections, I will use specific examples to illustrate the challenges that arose when implementing participation with genuine power redistribution. This experience confirmed Cornwall's (2016) assertion that a nuanced and situated understanding of power and empowerment, including their structural basis, is essential to maintain their transformative potential.

I will also discuss the potential limitations in implementing the new approach, as well as the fears and uncertainties that may surface when professionals are either unfamiliar with the concepts of participation and empowerment or have only a theoretical understanding of them. These experiences highlighted elements of mostly unconscious, deficit-based thinking used as arguments to resist power redistribution (Gupta et al., 2018). The following critical analysis is mainly linked to the element of power-redistribution and touches different spheres of power.

3.6.1 Power of information: what knowledge is shared with whom?

The first tensions in redistributing power became apparent regarding power of information. This revolved around who had access to which information and from whom or where additional information could be obtained. Previously, the social worker or pedagogue leading the meeting would write brief notes afterward. These minutes were accessible to all staff but were never made available to the women who participated in the meetings. Many of these women were unaware that such notes even existed. This paradox, where non-participants had access to the minutes while the actual participants did not, became a focal point in the effort to redistribute power.

To address this, a handwritten binder accessible to all was introduced and kept in the meeting room. Each participant took turns writing the minutes, with the option to do so in their preferred language. The only requirement was that the minutes be orally translated at the next assembly so everyone could understand them. Illiterate participants were exempt from this task until they gained sufficient writing skills.

The announcement that the minutes would no longer be digital but instead kept in the meeting room caused some confusion and resistance within the team. Previously, few staff members had shown interest in regularly reading the meeting minutes, but suddenly there was a strong desire to stay informed. Consulting the binder was considered impractical, and the possibility that the notes might be written in a language the team could not read—requiring them to ask the writer for clarification—shifted the power of information, which heightened staff members' irritation and resistance. The change was intended to reduce the resistance that the women had previously shown towards the meetings by giving them an active role in writing the minutes and thus fostering more participatory, eye-level discussions. While this intervention had

a positive effect on the women, it produced the opposite effect on the staff members, whose irritation and resistance increased.

The discussion revealed that equal access to the meeting minutes was perceived—consciously or subconsciously—as a loss of power by the staff members. While initial interest in the new approach had been minimal, the issue of the minutes sparked a prolonged debate. The compromise reached required me to send an additional email to the team summarising the main points after each meeting, rather than sharing the full protocol. Critically speaking, this decision effectively re-established the exclusivity of information, once again excluding the women. The result was a continuation of two separate communication channels: official minutes accessible to everybody through the handwritten binder and a summary email circulated only among staff.

3.6.2 Power on resources: delegate responsibilities

The regulation of wash coins proved to be significantly more challenging. Simultaneously with the project's launch, wash coins were introduced. Due to years of various conflicts among the women over the use of the washing machines, the wash coin system was implemented as an attempt to further structure washing machine usage. With the introduction of the coins, it became necessary to create a distribution system. This sparked a discussion within the team about who should manage this responsibility and what the regulations should look like. My suggestion to organise this within the house assembly and delegate the responsibility of distribution to the women was gratefully accepted. Initially, the team felt relieved to offload this task, as everyone was already dealing with a heavy workload.

In the house meeting, we developed a system where the number of coins each woman received weekly depended on the number of children she had. Each month, a different woman was responsible for managing the coins. Within a few months, the women were organising this system entirely autonomously, and it was only discussed once a month who would take over the management next.

Some time later, a colleague asked me for details about the coin distribution, which I could not provide. I referred her to the woman currently in charge. In my view, this moment highlighted the success of the project and a true form of participation. However, my colleague had a different interpretation and expressed some irritation at my lack of knowledge. This led to discussions within the team and called for more control. My lack of detailed knowledge was seen as disorganisation, despite the fact that everything was functioning smoothly in practice and there were no conflicts regarding laundry.

A lengthy discussion followed, during which I explained that participatory practices meant my lack of detailed knowledge could be seen as a success. While some colleagues understood and supported this perspective, others found it incomprehensible. It became apparent that asking the women for information was particularly challenging for some staff members, illustrating

how power redistribution can be unsettling and how ‘participation’ is not universally understood or embraced by all professionals.

The discussions were intense and ultimately concluded with the decision to maintain the new system. This outcome was not a reflection of consensus or a shared belief in the success of the new practice but was also due to a lack of alternative solutions and the impracticality of implementing other changes amid the team’s heavy workload. Thus, different interpretations of the development of the new approach persisted, hovering somewhere between success and loss of control.

3.6.3 Power over harmony: shared spaces and living together

Following these initial developments, which I marked as successes, I sought further opportunities to integrate the women into daily activities, redistribute power, delegate responsibility, and ultimately relieve my colleagues. I focused on the cleaning schedule, which had been a constant source of discussion. Although each woman had her own independent apartment with her children, some common spaces existed, such as the staircase, a larger kitchen, and a playroom for the children. Additionally, some communal tasks needed to be organised, like taking the full garbage bins outside once a week. The colleague responsible for updating the schedule weekly or bi-weekly had to ensure it wasn’t forgotten or reassigned during absences and often found herself in a monitoring role when disagreements about cleanliness arose. Therefore, I proposed to the team that I take over the cleaning schedule, present it at the house meeting, and transfer the responsibility for task distribution and rotation to the women.

My suggestion was immediately rejected as impractical, with arguments stating that the ongoing discussions about cleaning demonstrated the women were incapable of self-organisation, and therefore, the cleaning schedule had to remain under staff control. Two main concerns were raised: a) that conflicts would escalate and disrupt communal living, and b) that the house would become filthy. From my perspective, I could only partially understand these concerns. I countered the argument about the house becoming dirty by suggesting a trial period; if after one month no cleaning took place, we could revert to the old system, leaving us in a reversible, albeit temporarily dirty, situation. Taking a meta-perspective on this discussion, we can observe several moments of othering and a lack of recognition by describing the women as ‘incapable’, although one of the core principles of admission to the shelter is the autonomy of the woman (Krumer-Nevo, 2021; WAVE, 2004). This open discrepancy evidences the difficulties that arise in enacting theoretical principles in practice and further it highlights the importance to look at concrete details to understand what challenges come along the principles of empowerment and participation.

Addressing the concern about increased conflicts was much more challenging as various attitudes towards conflicts were present in the team. Some

colleagues believed that maintaining harmonious coexistence in the women's shelter was crucial and that ensuring this harmony was a professional responsibility. However, I, along with some other colleagues, held the view that conflicts are an inherent part of communal living, including in a women's shelter. We identified two main reasons for this: a) the constant turnover of residents, with the composition rarely staying the same for one to two months. The shelter hosts diverse women from various backgrounds and life experiences, leading to significantly different lifestyles; b) all the women came from situations of violence, meaning they had experienced unresolved conflicts, felt unseen and unheard, been controlled, and had their boundaries disrespected. Therefore, their stay in the women's shelter could also serve as a learning environment for constructive conflict solving, where they could practice communicating their boundaries and recognising and respecting the boundaries of others.[2]

These two core considerations led me and some colleagues to believe that the goal was not to avoid conflicts and to guarantee harmony, but to provide a suitable context, turning the shelter into a kind of training ground for conflict resolution. In our discussions, we engaged with what Cornwall (2016) conceptualises as the relational and processual dimensions of empowerment. From this perspective, empowerment cannot be understood as a linear progression towards a predetermined goal, but rather as an open-ended and contingent process. Crucially, such a process must accommodate the possibility of failure, of encountering dead ends, or of diverging onto side routes, thereby recognising the inherently uncertain and negotiated character of empowerment.

This led to several weeks of discussion within the team about whether it was feasible to entrust the organisation of the cleaning schedule to the women. Ultimately, I prevailed, not so much because of a true consensus, but due to my persistence and the trust I had built over the many years of working together. Thus, I initiated a trial phase, beginning the process of transferring the responsibility for the cleaning schedule to the women. After a few months, the following observations emerged: the discussions around the cleaning schedule remained the same. There were always some women who diligently fulfilled their tasks and others who partially or completely ignored their duties. There was a varied understanding of cleanliness and the frequency of task rotation—whether weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly—constantly changed. Discussions frequently arose about who should check if the cleaning had been done. At first glance, it might seem that there was no real change in whether the women or the staff were responsible for the cleaning schedule.

Upon a closer look, changes aligned with the principles of participation and empowerment became evident. These changes can be described as positive or desirable developments within the context of this reflection. The staff member who had previously been responsible for the cleaning schedule felt relieved. She was able to delegate the task and, importantly, was no longer

placed in a supervisory role. While discussions within the entire team only partially subsided and the project was still viewed with considerable scepticism, this staff member saw it as a positive development.

As for the women, the following was observed: although the number and type of discussions remained more or less the same, they were now conducted within a different framework and under different conditions. It was no longer about asking the staff member for control and rules from a position of power asymmetry, which had almost created a parent-child dynamic. Instead, the focus shifted to finding solutions together. The residents were required to address and constructively resolve conflicts.

This, in turn, was very demanding for me as the moderator of the house meetings, as it involved bringing together the women's often very different conflict management styles and finding common ground. Additionally, it was crucial to ensure that no hierarchical order among the women was established, such as one where those who had lived in the shelter the longest would take the lead. Therefore, not all meetings were pleasant or harmonious. There were difficult moments, and some conflicts required several meetings to resolve. These tense moments in the meetings with the women fuelled discussions within the team, particularly due to the varying interpretations of the presence of conflicts. This, in turn, placed me in my roles as staff member and facilitator of the house meetings in a challenging position, having to both facilitate the conflict resolution process among the women and justify the overall success of the new approach within the team, despite the conflicts.

3.7 Power dynamics and empowerment: navigating participation, control, and feminist principles

The examples highlight challenges that can arise even with small new practices introduced under the principles of participatory, feminist social work in an empowerment process. They demonstrate the importance of discussing daily realities, as no social worker or pedagogue would openly oppose participation or empowerment principles. It is the examination of daily working practices that allows for a critical discussion of challenges related to power redistribution.

A key goal of feminist social work in a women's shelter is to support women's empowerment through fostering autonomy, agency, and participation in decision-making (WAVE, 2004). The central principles of a women's shelter—protection, empowerment, and social change—align with feminist social work's focus on addressing power imbalances faced by women, particularly those experiencing gender-based violence. Empowerment in shelters is ideally promoted through practices encouraging self-determination, democratic decision-making, and equal participation. At the same time, empowerment must be contextualised to reflect present needs and resources (Watson, 2002).

While staff members aligned their practice with these principles, the examples show that promoting self-determination and equal participation does not always extend to the relationship between practitioners and residents. The project uncovered blind spots within the team that can be understood as unconscious forms of othering based on deficit-thinking. As Gupta et al. (2018) demonstrated, even subtle deficit-thinking can negatively affect relationships.

The new approach sought to reduce these forms of othering by decentralising control and encouraging women to take responsibility for tasks such as documenting house meetings and organising communal duties like cleaning and laundry. The introduction of handwritten meeting minutes, stored in a binder accessible to all women, and delegating the wash coin system represented a shift of power from staff to residents and moved towards participatory decision-making processes.

However, some staff resistance to power redistribution became evident. Some members expressed discomfort at not having direct access to meeting minutes or control over the wash coin system. This reluctance underscores how practices that threaten traditional power structures can provoke discomfort. Empowerment and participation are often embraced in theory, but their implementation may expose professionals' fears of losing control (Watson, 2002). Why some team members were more receptive than others remains unanswered and could be explored in further research. Reflecting on such experiences can help better understand resistance in social work practice (Gupta et al., 2018) and reduce instances of othering, which risk labelling resistant women as 'unsocialisable' (Cremer-Schäfer, 2018).

The meeting minutes illustrate how informational power reinforces hierarchies. Previously, only staff had access, excluding women from information concerning them. By transferring responsibility for writing and sharing the minutes, staff relinquished control and allowed women to take ownership of outcomes. Yet staff reactions, such as demands to revert to emailed summaries, highlight a lingering need for oversight. This revealed an underlying form of informational power and a tendency to maintain distance between 'us and them' (Cremer-Schäfer, 2018; Krumer-Nevo, 2021).

The introduction of the wash coin system further demonstrated the challenges of power redistribution. Delegating responsibility initially fostered autonomy and showed a successful participatory approach. Yet team discussions revealed discomfort with disrupted structures of control. Perceptions of success varied: smooth operation indicated empowerment to some, while others viewed the absence of oversight as disorganisation. This underscores how participation can be difficult to embrace and reveals the inherent tension between empowerment and control.

Tensions also emerged between maintaining harmony and allowing conflict as part of communal life. One group of staff saw harmony as a professional duty, while others believed the shelter should be a space to develop conflict-resolution skills, reflecting the educational aspect of empowerment.

These tensions align with Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed (2014), where learning and empowerment emerge through dialogue and conflict rather than passive coexistence. Feminist social work emphasises that empowerment is not about shielding women from difficulties but supporting them in navigating conflicts independently.

Empowerment ideals face further limits in practice, especially when residents have diverse backgrounds and capacities. House meetings must accommodate differences in language, education, and emotional stability. Newly arrived women or those in acute crisis may struggle to engage, while women nearing the end of their stay may be less invested in communal issues. Practices like rotating minute-taking aim to bridge these divides, but participation is not always equal. Women's varying stages of their journey reveal both the limits of empowerment and the need to respect those not interested in active participation (Cornwall, 2016). In exploring such limits, the framework of situated intersectionality can foster understanding and create new spaces where different forms of empowerment and participation might emerge.

3.8 How empowered are addressees allowed to become?

This chapter explored contradictions in empowerment practices within a women's shelter, showing that empowerment is not automatically achieved by establishing a shared stance. A critical examination reveals that it hinges on professionals granting 'permission' within boundaries they set. Consequently, empowerment within an institution is never an inherent right; it can be limited or withdrawn, highlighting an unresolved dilemma of social work. Empowerment is fostered through participatory decision-making but mediated by professionals' control and power dynamics. As Leonardsen (2007) notes, empowerment is context-dependent and reflects power relations. While feminist social work seeks to dismantle hierarchies, staff resistance to relinquishing authority can limit relational empowerment. Initiatives such as participation in house meetings succeed only when staff genuinely embrace this concept. Ultimately, residents' empowerment is linked to staff's willingness to share power and manage communal complexities, making empowerment a continuous negotiation. Implementing participatory solutions requires long-term commitment and perseverance. Both residents and staff are active learners, and participation can empower residents while serving as a reflective tool for staff. Team dynamics are crucial, as without full engagement participatory efforts risk becoming superficial. Conflicts should be seen as opportunities for growth, strengthening empowerment and self-efficacy. Despite these efforts, institutional power largely persists (Watson, 2002). Even with practices fostering empowerment, authority rests with staff, who can reverse them. Participatory practices remain fragile, vulnerable to institutional priorities, and highlight the difficulty of addressing entrenched power structures.

3.9 How did things evolve after I left the team?

After two years, I ended my involvement due to a career change, and a colleague took over facilitating the house meetings. The ReIncluGen project provided me with the opportunity to reconnect with my former colleagues and inquire about what had happened over the six years since I left the women's shelter. Due to retirements and resignations, the team composition had changed significantly. However, the colleague who had taken over the house meetings was still present and continued to lead them. We engaged in an extended discussion and evaluation of the participatory practices that had been introduced. She informed me that several changes had taken place, such as the removal of the coin-operated washing machine and the associated coin distribution system. This structural change simplified communal life, yet the participative approach to organising the cleaning schedule remained intact. The women continued to self-organise the cleaning schedule. While discussions about cleaning still arise, the significant difference now is that conflicts and discussions are resolved on an equal footing.

The most significant shift, as reported by my colleague, emerged within the staff dynamic itself. Despite the initial scepticism and resistance encountered when the participatory approach was first introduced, a culture of consultation with the women had become a lasting feature of the shelter's practice. As she explained: *What has remained is that we consult the women about house matters. If, for instance, there's an issue with the freezer, we ask them and work together to find a solution.* This represents more than a procedural change; it reflects a deeper, institutional shift towards recognising residents as active partners rather than passive recipients of support.

Women's involvement has also extended beyond day-to-day house matters into staff activities, such as public relations and awareness-raising initiatives. They now receive information on ongoing lectures, review presentation slides, and participate in discussions that foster mutual learning and respect. These discussions serve as both educational and empowering, allowing the women to share their insights and experiences while gaining knowledge about broader issues related to gender-based violence prevention and advocacy. This collaborative engagement has not only benefited the women by building their confidence and agency but has also enriched the professional practice of the team, illustrating the mutual value of participatory work.

In conclusion, fostering participatory approaches in the women's shelter has resulted in sustainable changes in the relationship between social workers and residents. This evolution demonstrates that genuine empowerment and participation are most effectively internalised through practical experience rather than theoretical study. While the process can be challenging and provoke discomfort, it ultimately encourages growth for both the professionals and the women they support. The findings emphasise that social work education should prioritise 'action-oriented preparedness' as suggested by Leonardsen (2007, p. 4), ensuring that

future practitioners are equipped to engage in and navigate participatory processes, thereby strengthening their impact in fostering empowerment and shared decision-making.

Notes

1 Some important clarifications should be made regarding the choices and opportunities for women to leave at any time. It is essential to understand that these choices do not reflect genuine freedom. All the women, along with their children, were fleeing gender-based violence. Some continued to face violence and death threats even after separation, leaving them with no alternatives but women's shelters. While they formally had a choice which women's shelter they prefer, in reality it was often limited to finding an available spot. Similarly, their decision to leave the shelter was restricted by their need for safety and the challenge of securing affordable housing. However, unlike various residential psycho-educational communities, none of these women were placed by social services, the court, or any other institution; their stay was solely based on their request for shelter.

2 An important note for readers: Recognising that women who have experienced gender-based violence may benefit from environments that promote constructive conflict resolution, where they can practice communicating their boundaries and recognising those of others, should not be misinterpreted as shifting responsibility for the violence they endured from the (usually male) perpetrator to the survivor.

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