

## *Astrid Stuckelberger*

### **“Why the Life-Course Approach to Gender Empowerment is Important?”**

#### **1. From Empowerment to Equality**

A common thread uniting each of the major UN international conferences since the 1990's is women's empowerment. The Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development stresses that the empowerment and autonomy of women is a highly important end in itself and necessary for the achievement of sustainable human development.

Despite International Conferences on Population and Development, World Summits for Social Development, World Conferences on Women and despite the progress achieved with the Beijing Platform for Action for Women and the Convention on the Elimination of Violence against Women (CEDAW), gender equality and discriminations are still insufficiently addressed in all regions of the world. In all parts of the world, women are facing threats to their lives, health and well-being. They receive less education than men and are over-represented among the poor and powerless. Today, the United Nations stresses that the international community is accountable to the world's women for fulfilling the significant commitments it has made to help make empowerment a reality of women's lives.

The past three decades have witnessed a steadily increasing awareness of the need to empower women through measures to increase social, economic and political equity, and broader access to fundamental human rights, improvements in nutrition, basic health and education (WEF, 2005). The World Economic Forum Gender Gap Report 2010 gives an interesting snapshot of current performance of some fundamental outcome variables related to basic human rights such as health, education, economic participation and political empowerment. It introduces valuable new insights regarding progress over the last five years: “On average, over 96% of the gap on health outcomes, 93% of the gap on educational attainment, 59% of the gap on economic participation and 18% of the gap on political empowerment has been closed. No country in the world has achieved gender equality. The four highest-ranking countries—Iceland, Norway, Finland, Sweden—have closed a little over 80% of their gender gaps, while the lowest ranking country—Yemen—has closed only around 46% of its gender gap.” (WEF, 2010).

Much more needs to be made to bring women to the front and find sustainable mechanisms to empowerment and to protect and promote their rights and access to all their rights. Therefore promoting empowerment of women in the Arab countries is an important issue and sharing the success stories or reasons for failures can only reinforce

progress and implementation of gender equality and access to quality of life for all. Given the relatively slow progress in many regions of the world in reaching decent levels of equality of women, the question to ask is if we can improve the methodology used in measuring needs, progress and addressing the different typologies of inequalities in women's life. This article suggests a new approach which goes beyond the traditional way of tackling gender empowerment and equality.

### ***Definition and Concept of Empowerment***

There are many different definitions of empowerment yet little consensus. Etymologically, at the center of empowerment is the word "power", which is reflected in the fact that in a gender perspective the "power of choice" and the "power to change" with freedom of choice and action are fundamental. The definition varies significantly across the world and at different times of history, with significant reference to sex, ethnicity, age, religion, migratory status, rural/urban residence, and many other variables. Furthermore, the perception of empowerment is different according to different people and their context. According to the definition used by the World Bank<sup>18</sup> "*Empowerment is the process of enhancing the capacity of individual or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Central to this process are actions which both build individual and collective assets, and improve the efficiency and fairness of the organizational and institutional context which govern the use of these assets.*"

According to UN documents, women's empowerment requires five components based on women's human right<sup>19</sup> :

- 1) a sense of self-worth
- 2) the self-determination of their choices
- 3) the access to opportunities and resources
- 4) the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home
- 5) the ability to influence the direction of social change to create

a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally.

Thus, the notion of empowerment is a multi-dimensional and cross-disciplinary process. It includes sociological, psychological, economic, and other dimensions, as well as a wide range of issues, from education and health care to governance and economic policy. Overall, empowerment is the strengthening not only of a social process but also of a personal process and of a structural situation that encourages or hinders women's empowerment and gender equality. Hence, addressing gender empowerment would be incomplete without including systematically the following 3 different approaches:

- ***Individual: psychological, personal***
  - > factors such as subjectivity, self-esteem, perception, beliefs, sense of coher

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18 World Bank website "What is empowerment?": <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTPOVERTY/EXTEMPowerment/0,,contentMDK:20272299~menuPK:546167~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:486411,00.html>

19 UN Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs with UNFPA, Guidelines to Women's Empowerment <http://www.un.org/popin/unfpa/taskforce/guide/iatfwemp.gdl.html>

- ence, sense of control
- **Collective: socio-familial**
  - > factors such as norms & roles change, inter-generational and intra-generational complexity, transgenerational impact
- **Structural: cultural, political**
  - Factors such as the constraints set by traditions, religious practices and codes, institutional habits.

In the mid-1990s, Sara Longwe developed the *Women's Empowerment Framework*<sup>20</sup> in which she conceptualized five levels of equality in a hierarchical order, with each higher level denoting a higher level of empowerment. She conceptualized it as the bases with which to assess the extent of women's empowerment in any area of social or economic life. Analyzing the many successes in empowering women must go along with recognizing what has stagnated or even regressed in gender equality. Facts and data show that a lot more needs to be done to increase empowerment and decrease gender inequality in all 5 following areas mentioned by Longwe (table 1).

Table 1: Women's Empowerment Framework and Levels of Equality

<b>Women's Empowerment Framework</b> Levels of Equality by Sarah Longwe <sup>2</sup>		
	Increased equality	Increased empowerment
<p><b>Control</b> participation of women in the decision-making process to achieve balance of control men women over the factors of production, without one in a position of dominance.</p> <p><b>Participation/Mobilization</b> equal participation in the decision-making process, policy-making, planning and administration. In development projects: involvement in needs assessment, project design, implementation and evaluation</p> <p><b>Conscientization</b> understanding of the difference between sex roles and gender roles and the belief that gender relations and the gender division of labour should be fair and agreeable to both sides, and not based on the domination of one over the other</p> <p><b>Access</b> women's access to factors of production, land, labour, credit, training, marketing facilities, and all publicly available services and benefits, on an equal basis with men. Equality of access is obtained by securing equality of opportunity through legal reform to remove discriminatory provisions.</p> <p><b>Welfare</b> level of material welfare of women, relative to men, with respect to food supply, income and medical care, without reference to whether women are themselves the active creators and producers of their material needs.</p>		

One fundamental aspect is lacking in most discussions about empowering women and gender equality issues: the systematization of time in individual lives and linked lives, which is known in social science by the terms 'life course perspective' (sociology) or 'human development perspective' (psychology). This dimension of timing gender inequality can be tackled in a stepwise way by analyzing with more clarity and efficiency

20 Cited in March, C. I. Smyth and M. Mukhopadhyay. A Guide to Gender-Analysis Frameworks. London: Oxfam Great Britain, 1999

not only the situation of women but the solutions at hand throughout a lifetime, specific to women's life cycle and life events. Empowerment is a process, it unfolds with time and it fluctuates with time, but is not acquired instantly. What is then needed to measure empowerment of women throughout time?

This article will try in a concise way to demonstrate the need and way ahead to grasp the concept of time, this essential dimension of sustainability in women's empowerment.

## **2. Life course perspective: the missing dimensions in gender empowerment**

The Life Course Perspective is recent: it developed as an interdisciplinary field over the last 30 to 40 years. It is a complex interplay of biological, behavioural, psychological, and social protective and risk factors contributing to equality levels across the span of a person's life.

What is specific to the life course "perspective" in comparison with other research areas? Are there set criteria recognized as part of the life course approach?

**Social scientists underline that the Life perspective acknowledges that changes in human lives are part of human development and happen with defined characteristics. Karl-Ulrich Mayer (2009), life course specialist identified 4 criteria defining the specificity of the life course:**

*The Life course approach happens..*

- *over a long stretch of life time, such as from childhood to old age, and not just as particular episodes, such as transition to marriage or first birth, or narrow life phases. There is also the strong assumption that prior life history has strong impacts on later life outcomes.*
- *across a larger series of cohorts rather than by a few cohorts or synthetic cohorts based on cross-sectional data (life time and historical time).*
- *across life domains, such as work and family, often implying interdisciplinary approaches.*
- *in the context of collective contexts, such as couples, families, cohorts, generations.*

For example, inequities in birth outcomes, such as low birth weight and infant mortality, are often explained by the quality and frequency of prenatal care. In contrast, the Life Course Perspective suggests that these inequities result from differences in protective and risk factors between groups of women over the course of their lives. As a result, the health and socioeconomic status of one generation directly affects the health status of the next one.

Based on those characteristics, it is clear that gender issues at the United Nations and at the international level are not addressed in a life course perspective. Too often the issue

is looked at in a 'static way', in general a "snapshot of women's condition versus men condition" at one point in time, while the important issue is the dynamics of women's condition throughout their lives. While useful as a basis, many questions remain unanswered with the 'snapshot' view: how are inequalities evolving at different stages in life? in different life situations? different life events, etc? how can inequalities/equalities cumulate through the different stages of women's lives? how can we measure and ensure that the equality condition of women and their empowerment be sustainable and long lasting?

A new method is needed to empower all women at all ages and point in time so as to finally close the gender gap in a sustainable way. The traditional methodological framework should move forward in new ways, from the static view to a more dynamic and comprehensive framework. Through the example of charts and data below, one can see how limited our understanding of the situation can be if the static approach, the most frequently used, is dominating gender empowerment and equality analysis:

- 1. Static approach to the Status of Women** (*i.e. univariate statistics, cross-sectional, prevalence*): women's lives must be screened through the data to find a similar pattern of life events: a static approach to prevalence of events linked with age or with life events (e.g. pattern of school education, of violence, of first marriage, of first birth, of first job, etc).
- 2. Dynamic approach to the Status of Women** (*i.e. multi-variate data and analysis, longitudinal, retrospective, incidence*): with dynamic analysis, the static data can be correlated with different factors to see if one can identify typologies or trends by crossing this data with other factors (*i.e. cultural or social determinants*). This approach helps avoiding generalization and reinforces specificities of different groups of women for example.
- 3. Comprehensive approach to the Status of Women** (*i.e. panels, cohort studies, regressions and complex multivariate analysis, grade of membership, clusters, log-linear modelling, etc.*): integrating static and dynamic aspects of time to identify patterns and typologies over the life course. This approach will provide comprehensive modelisation of women's lives and realities according to specific contexts (*i.e. poverty, violence*), giving a sense of (multi)linear cause-effect, hence a more precise and efficient intervention system.

Ideally, this method, systematically applied, would elucidate remaining barriers and measure the increase/decrease of women's empowerment and level of equity at different moments of their lives (longitudinal pattern) and of collective lives (cohort pattern), such as a life/time indicator correlated to different factors.

Gender inequality and discrimination is a worldwide issue in all regions, settings and classes, it is persistent throughout the life course and cumulates different layers, it is

also persistent throughout generations (Stuckelberger, 2006). Therefore, a more refined and comprehensive approach to women’s empowerment and to the concept of ‘‘human development’’ should integrate and analyze the whole life span, all age groups, see specificities for each generations and cultures. Identifying different typologies of gender inequality throughout a life, can only help us to bring together what is needed for those specific ‘lives’ to increase gender equality towards the highest level possible of equity, in line with the international framework set by the United Nations,

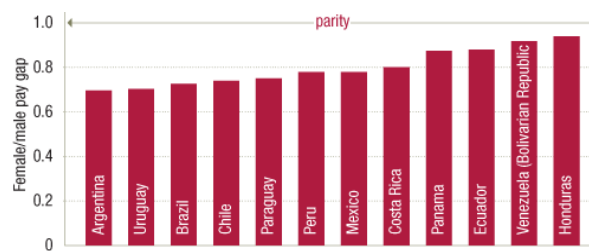
Examples of the static (A), dynamic (B) and comprehensive (C) approach to gender analysis

(From the Progress Report of the World’s Women, UN Women 2010-2011)

A. Static Approach to Data on Women’s Condition

Graphic 1

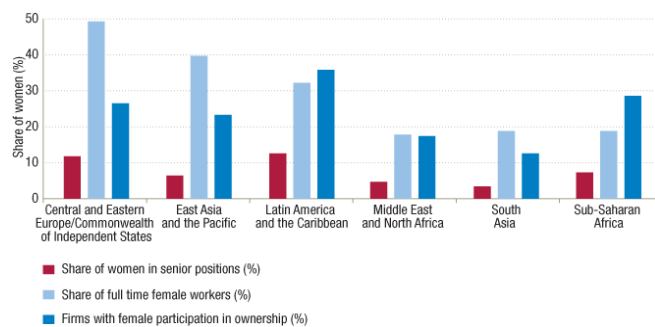
Gender Wage Gaps in Latin America



Across Latin America, women are paid less than men.

Graphic 2.

Percentage of Women in Senior Positions

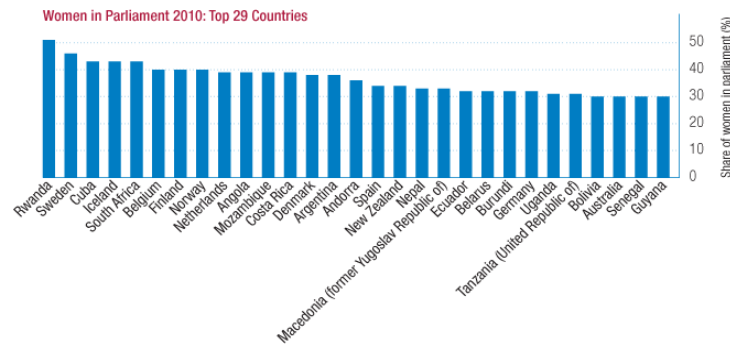


There is one woman for every nine men in senior management positions. The percentage of women in senior positions ranges from 3% to 13%, despite the fact that their share of full-time employment ranges from 18% to 49%.

## B. Motion Approach to Women's Condition: Longitudinal Data

Graphic 3.

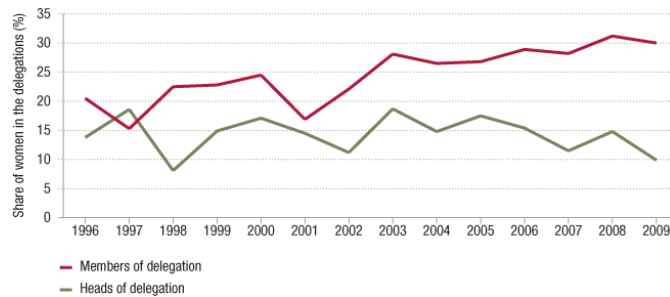
Women in Parliament 2010: Top 29 countries



As of June 2010, twenty-nine countries have reached or exceeded the 30% mark in women's representation in parliament (29 used quotas)

Graphic 4

% of Women Delegate to UN Climate Change Conferences

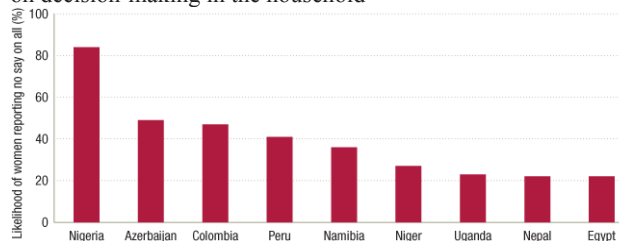


Women are not fairly represented as delegates or heads of delegations at the United Nations. The example of the UN Climate Change Conferences over time shows 30% as members of UN delegations are women, and even less as heads of delegation.

## C - Dynamic Approach to Women's Lives: correlations and cause-effect perspective

Graphic 5

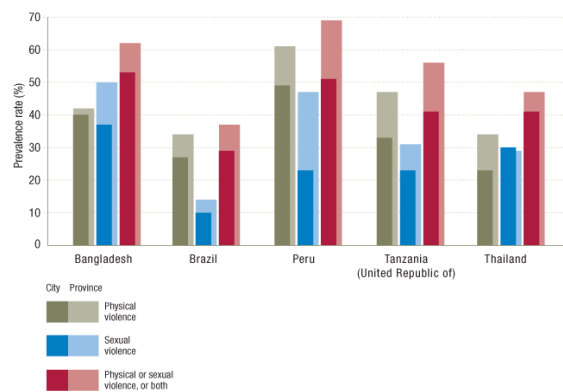
The lifetime impact of early marriage on decision-making in the household



No matter what their current age, women who married before they were 18 are far more likely to report later in life that they have no say in decisions than those who married later.

For example, in Colombia, women who married young are 47% more likely to report having no say, compared to women who married later.

Graphic 6  
LifETIME Prevalence of Physical and Sexual Violence by  
an Intimate Partner (accumulation of types of violence during life)



In five sites, more than half of women have experienced physical or sexual violence, or both. Timing and timing counts in empowerment.

### 3. How to Integrate the Life Course Perspective in Gender Empowerment and Equality21?

Gender-related empowerment and equality throughout the life course reflect different factors interacting together in a time framework. The analysis therefore includes a whole set of processes associated with gender-specific life styles, labour division and socio-economic inequalities between men and women during the life course.

The main features of the life course perspective analysis include the 3 following aspects:

*I. The life course development is analyzed as the outcome of personal characteristics and individual action as well as of cultural, institutional and structural conditions (relating micro-, meso- and macro-levels of analysis, structure and agency).*

*II. The life course/cohort analysis is essential for social policies with a paradigm shift from curative to preventive intervention.*

*III. The Life Course Perspective integrates a focus on critical periods and early life events with an emphasis on the wear and tear a person experiences over time, considering cumulative discriminations and inequities in the analysis of factors such as: socioeconomic status, race and racism, neighbourhood conditions, health care, disease status, stress, nutrition and weight status, birth weight, and a range of behaviours are some of the key protective factors and risk factors that may affect equity levels, from birth to death, and at each stage of the reproductive life, and over the ageing process up to end-of-life issues.*

Another aspect of the analysis is to integrate the concept of cumulative advantage/disadvantage consistent or fluctuant throughout life. For example, a woman born in a context of poverty, migration and racial difference will go through her childhood with



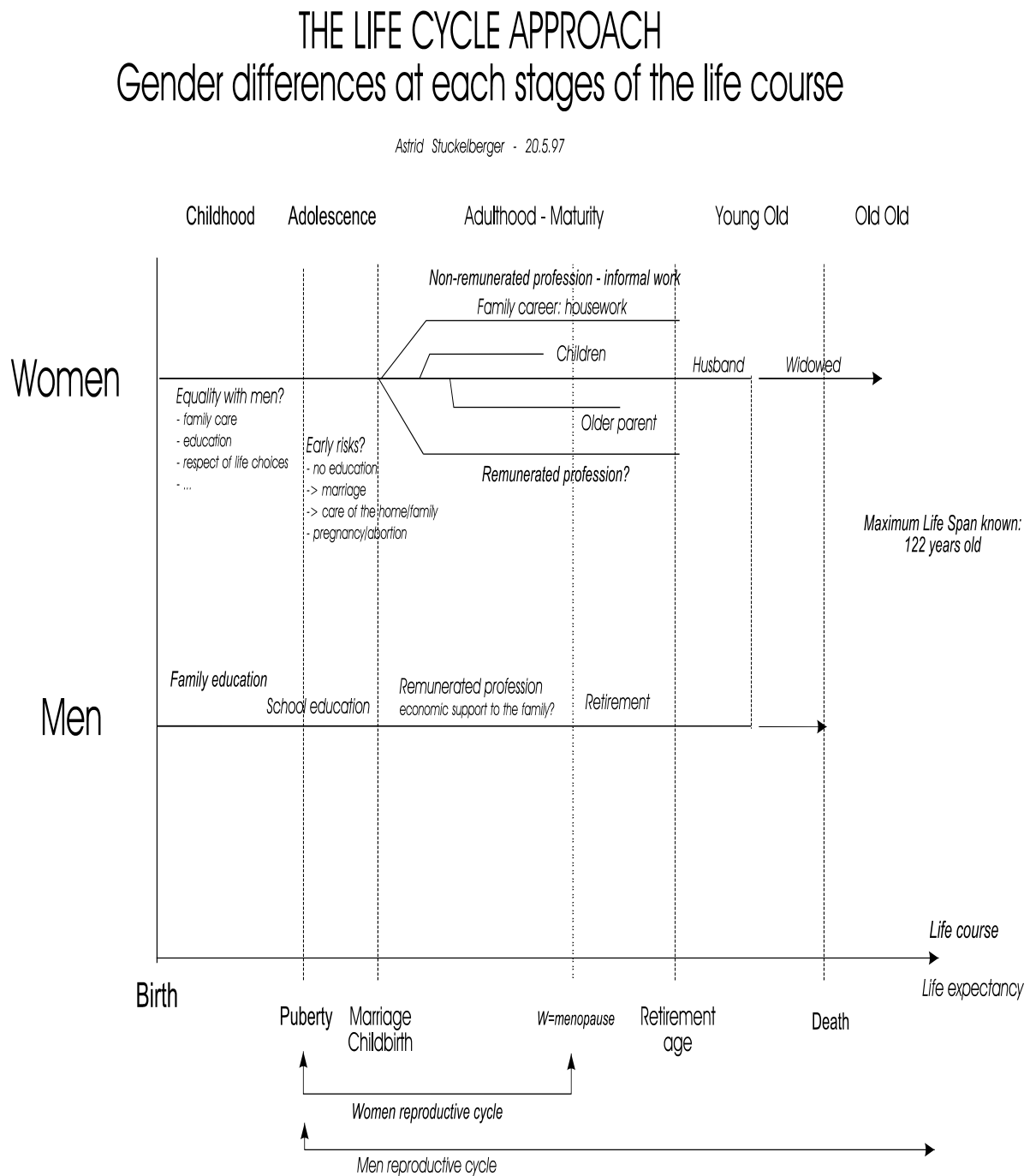
a high risk of triple discrimination (girl, poor, ethnicity) and go through the rest of her life with a cumulative effect discrimination. Another example at the other end of life, an older woman, widowed with only basic school education will also be at high risk of living multiple discriminations and abuse (gender, old, no education, vulnerable to abuse or to defend her rights, etc), this condition being the outcome of a life-time of cumulative inequalities puts her at multiple level of suffering unjust treatment (Stuckelberger et Höpflinger, 1996, 1998). Robert Merton's (1968) initiated the concept of cumulative advantages/disadvantages applied to human lives and describes it as dealing with "the ways in which initial comparative advantage of trained capacity, structural location, and available resources make for successive increments of advantage such that the gaps between the haves and the have-nots widen" ("The Matthew Effect in Science", p.606), Dannefer (2003) proposes the definition of cumulative advantage/disadvantage as "the systemic tendency for inter-individual divergence in a given characteristic (e.g. money, health or status) with the passage of time" (p. 327).

Researchers have recognized the neglected aspects of life cycle individual and cohort analysis and the need to look beyond generalizations to examine more closely key characteristics of life trajectories and life cycles, as well as the factors that produce them such as early childhood peculiarities, life events, period effects, etc. The interest lies in analysing the extent to which observed age differences and age-related variability results from systemic life course processes and to identify individual trajectories within period- or cohort-effects.

#### **4. Risks of Gender Disempowerment and Inequality at Different Stages of the Life Cycle**

Gender differences during the life course or life cycle are consistent and in most cases putting women in a higher risk situations of disempowerment and inequality than men. The literature consistently underlines the fact that the effects of socio-economic differences on living gender inequalities and well-being persist across the life span. Indeed, from the point of view of the cumulative advantage/disadvantage hypothesis, the relationship between many types of social status and living conditions increases in strength (Dannefer, 1988; O'Rand, 1996). Based on the Figure 1, examples of situations specific to the life cycle are listed below and give a first framework to approach women empowerment at specific stages of life as well as addressing gender equality in different life circumstances. This is not an exhaustive list of risks or situations but gives a first grid to analyze further gender inequalities over the life course, at each stage one can than ask oneself if and how women are empowered to counter the inequalities they live.

Figure 1 indicates some of the most obvious relationships concerning men-women differential stages of the life cycle during the life course based on the ‘specific risks’ for women (‘risks’ here defined as the probability of experiencing a specific situation during one’s life-time).



### Stage 1: Childhood

Overall: There is evidence that childhood adversity linked to social inequalities experienced during childhood has important consequences in later in life, such as on physical and psychological health, (see Barker, 1998; Brunner et al., 1996; Costa, 1999; Hayward and Gorman, 2004; Kuh and Ben-Shlomo, 1997; Lynch, Kaplan and Salonen,

1997; Power and Peckham, 1990; Schwartz et al., 1995;). Recent evidence suggests that a family's socio-economic status background and pre-adult intellectual resources have a significant effect on outcomes at midlife, but that they may be entirely mediated by adult achievements (Zimmermann, Stuckelberger and Meyer, 2006). These results underscore the importance of assessing total effects rather than direct effects in assessing the influences of socio-economic factors across the lifespan. Gender discrimination contributes to the continuance of poverty.(UNICEF, 2007, CPRC, 2010) Poverty will not cease until girls and women have the same rights and opportunities in life as boys and men. Research indicates that prevailing social norms and cultural practices have a powerful negative influence on the life opportunities of girls during childhood and adolescence. Some of the key barriers include:

#### *Risks at birth :*

- Foeticide and infanticide: UNICEF notes that “Where there is a clear economic or cultural preference for sons, the misuse of (pregnancy diagnostic tools) can facilitate female foeticide (UNICEF, 2007).
- Infant mortality at birth is still very high in many low and middle income countries and is an important Millennium Development Goal

#### *Risks during school years :*

- Discriminatory school education: A central focus of the middle years of childhood and adolescence is ensuring access to, and completion of, quality primary and secondary education. With a few exceptions, it is mostly girls who suffer from educational disadvantage. They are less likely than boys to be enrolled in school, are more likely to drop out when enrolled, and are less likely to develop vital skills and competencies Impoverished girls are 3.5 times more likely to be out of school than their wealthier peers (UN, 2010).

#### *Child labour*

- The cycle of poverty forces many girls into situations of child labour to ensure their survival, thus perpetuates the cycle of poverty and limits educational opportunities. More than 100 million girls, ages 5 – 17, are involved in child labour around the world, with the majority involved in hazardous work, including domestic service. (ILO, 2009).
- Girl exploitation and trafficking: girls are more likely to be hidden working as domestic servants or trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation, even at young ages.

#### *Other Risks as a Girl Child – Youth:*

Many other risks and hazards can have long lasting deleterious effects on the full realisation of women, to mention a few:

- Physical and sexual violence: Girls are disproportionately affected by gender-based violence in the household, at school, in the workplace, and in the community resulting in both physical and psychological harm.

- Early marriage and forced marriage: The practice of child marriage, which is most prevalent in poor, rural communities, often perpetuates the cycle of poverty. Because of pressure to bear sons, young brides miss out on their education and adolescence. They and their future children are also more likely to experience numerous hardships and ailments, from malnutrition and physical and sexual abuse.
- Reproductive health issues: female genital mutilation, early pregnancy and abortion,

### **Stage 2: Adolescence – Beginning of reproductive phase**

Overall: Specific areas that UNICEF highlights during adolescence can happen for the first time or be a continuity of childhood. Those inequities and discriminations include: female genital mutilation/cutting, child marriage and premature parenthood, sexual abuse, exploitation and trafficking, sexual and reproductive health and HIV/AIDS. Among the greatest threats to adolescent development are abuse, exploitation and violence, and the lack of vital knowledge about sexual and reproductive health, including HIV/AIDS (UNICEF, 2007).

- Educational Levels: The positive relationship between levels of schooling (or education) and health is one of the strongest and best documented linkages in this area (e.g., Adler et al., 1993 1994; Ross and Mirowsky 2003, 1999; Ross and Wu, 1995 1996). Summarizing their research on education levels, Mirowsky and Ross (2003) argue that amount of schooling creates most of the relationship between achieved social status and health, and that it is primarily through the increased sense of personal control that results from higher levels of schooling that greater health and other performance outcomes are achieved.
- Violence and abuse in all its forms: physical, psychological, social, economic and structural
- Labour exploitation: labour exploitation at home and outside home with no recognition and retribution of informal work. Forced sexual exploitation such as early prostitution and trafficking.
- Issues linked to reproductive health: denial of access to different health care and family planning counselling (access to contraception, prevention and care are denied, questions of abortion, of young motherhood, etc) .Early marriage and forced marriage

### **Stage 3: Adulthood – Maturity - Motherhood**

Overall: Motherhood and old age are two key periods in many women's lives when the pernicious effects of multiple difficulties: illiteracy, poverty, ill-health, violence, work abuse and inequality can combine. It is estimated that each year more than half a million women—roughly one woman every minute—die as a result of pregnancy complications and childbirth, 99% of which occur in developing countries UNICEF, 2007). Yet many of these women's lives could be saved if they had access to basic health care services.

- Multiple roles and informal/formal work overload: the majority of women bear

the burden of multiple work both at the family level and at the professional level. Women with children increase their informal labour by often taking care of the children, husband and their elderly parents/parents-in-law (also called the sandwich generation trapped into working informally for two other generations). All data in the world show that women are the main informal carers who can impede on their access to labour or to a professional career. The years spent raising children with no other professional experience put them at disadvantage after their parenthood period to find a qualified and equally paid job compared to men. Their life as mother at home is not recognized both economically and professionally and put them at higher risk of poverty and exclusion.

- Health: The gendered nature of life course trajectories clearly structures and constraints the health-related resources and opportunities of men and women. Those factors work additively or interact with one another to produce gender differences in health.
- Labour: women often work more than men, yet are paid less. As the labour force participation of women and particularly of young mothers has increased, modern women are obviously often in a situation of multiple stress and overload. Table 2 shows an example of adopting a life course perspective in empowering women in employment in Europe.

*“Women constitute half the world’s population, perform nearly two thirds of this work hours, receive one-tenth of the world’s income and own less than one-hundred of the world’s property”*

Prof. Krishna Ahooja-Patel,  
Quote in ILO editorial (1978) cited in Development has a Women’s Face: Insights from within the UN” (2007)

**Table 2. Example of empowering women in employment in Europe in a life course perspective**

**European countries adopted policies empowering women to choose long life employment patterns**

- Time policies shape individual working-time options across the life course
- Parental leave systems promote employment integration if
  - Childcare services available
  - Includes earnings-related income replacement
  - Flexible options including reduced hours working
- Long leave periods of 2-3 years create re-integration problems; esp. where childcare is lacking or economy in recession
- Paid quotas for fathers' promote male take-up, but unlikely to eradicate gender disparities in care
- Individual 'right to request' can improve opportunities for better quality PTW
- Such measures reduce but do not eradicate the lifetime 'care penalty'
  - flatter wage progression and reduced career advancement if have long periods of leave or part-time working during life course

## **Stage 4: At older ages – ending of the reproductive phase**

Overall: elderly women may face double discrimination on the basis of both gender and age. Many older women are plunged into poverty at a time of life when they are very vulnerable. However, “children’s rights are advanced when programmes that seek to benefit children and families also include elderly women. In a society where life after active motherhood is longer than active motherhood, concentrating one’s life around motherhood is a pattern going through a social transition. At the same time more and more women realise that a too strong emphasis on traditional family roles (housewife, mother, etc.) has its price, particularly after divorce or at older ages.

- Women are life long informal carers: with increased longevity all over the world we often find 2 generations of older ages and the young old generation taking care of the older generation and the grand-children, while they are themselves reported to suffer more than men at the same ages of chronic conditions and functional disabilities.
- Poverty and widowhood in older women: more often widowed, living alone, lower education average, men marry younger women and die before. Their rights to inheritance and assets are often denied, even by the family and thus their poverty level increases.
- Inexistence of the right of older women: the right of older persons, further more the right of older women need to be addressed. In contrast with other age groups, no framework exists to address older women inequalities and empowerment. More than 30 non-governmental organizations have issued a statement at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva in 2009 to underline the gap and ask for urgent measures<sup>22</sup>. The response came from CEDAW who adopted for the first time in 2010 a general recommendation on older women and protection of their rights<sup>23</sup>. More needs to be done for older women in the world, the bearer of a tradition and dignity of women for future generations. It is only when addressing violence, abuse and discrimination at older ages that we will guarantee the arrest of the vicious circle of transgenerational effects of inequalities throughout future generations (Stuckelberger, 2002, 2005, 2006).

## **5. Conclusion: Importance of the life course**

As demonstrated in this article, the life course approach includes a set of subjective/intrinsic and objective/extrinsic components building at each stage of the life course. This interplay between the individual and his socio-cultural and political environment is strongly marked by gender differences, not only due to innate biological differences, but moreover to its consequences on the differential experiences of life between men and women. From the above review of factors contributing to understanding the cu-

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<sup>22</sup> [http://www.spssi.org/\\_data/global/image/NGO%20Statement\\_Right%20OlderWomen\\_official2009.pdf](http://www.spssi.org/_data/global/image/NGO%20Statement_Right%20OlderWomen_official2009.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> CEDAW general recommendation on no 27(2010) : <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/CEDAW-C-2010-47-GC1.pdf>

mulative disadvantage/advantage of the life cycle, it appears that classification can be made between a) variables fixed during the youth period, b) variables that intervene during the life course, and c) recent and current conditions. All of them can have direct and indirect effects on the status of women during her life. This sequence constitutes the methodological rationale for the models proposed for gender empowerment and equality analysis.

As underlined, women accumulate marked disadvantages compared to men in early childhood that perpetuate throughout life. Time can catch up disadvantages early in life and counter the effects of negative factors, and vice versa. More research is needed to draw a balance sheet of positive and negative factors intervening over time, considering that the most recent period of time might well be the most crucial after all. The existence of gender differences between early disadvantages and for example current deleterious health status leads us to look at women and men through a differential lens during their life course. Inequalities engendered early in life in today's older cohorts have marked effects on their current status and life conditions, proven by studies on ageing for example (Stuckelberger, 1996). It is clear therefore, that in terms of better understanding inequalities among women, measures of socio-economic disadvantage over the life course are both conceptually and empirically superior to using socio-economic indicators from one point in time (Wamala et al., 2001). The identification of new factors related to gender differences such as individual developmental aspects specific to each sex could be a basis for reflection and intervention. Throughout life, the dynamics of a the life cycle events and situations among men and women provide different models that bring lessons not merely in a gender-specific way but moreover in a coherent and balanced perspective from which both sexes may benefit in the future. Finally, disentangling the ways in which factors at each stage of life act or interact to shape empowerment and/or equality for women is, obviously, complex and difficult and needs further investigation. The fact that explanations are not only specific to diverse factors described above, but may also vary from one cohort, population or region adds to this complexity. It is crucial to understand that the effects of early life exposures on later risks of discrimination and lack of rights are likely to be highly contextualized in both time and space. Several studies suggest that future research on the effects of cumulative advantages and disadvantages over the life course should explicitly adopt a gender perspective on the processes and pathways by which the condition of men and women may be affected by similar or different factors (Stuckelberger et Höpflinger, 1996, 1998)

The future success of the life course perspective and cumulative advantage/disadvantage theories lies in its capacity to elucidate new mechanisms and women's pathways leading to empowerment/disempowerment and equality/inequality, as well as its ability to explain social, environmental and temporal patterns unfair distribution in the population. Specifically, there is a need to develop a broader theoretical linkage between socio-cultural, economic and psychological conditions during the life course

by understanding: (1) the contextual factors that help mediate the effects of specific factors – e.g. the role of social isolation, social support and inter-generational social capital, health conditions, etc., and (2) the institutional- and societal-level opportunities and constraints that provide barriers to empowerment and equality, e.g. education, access to rights and their applications, access to jobs, health and judicial protection. Finally, this approach is only a first step in understanding the linkages between early life course factors, recent factors and current status of women in the Arab countries and open a promising field for future research and policy to support the empowerment of women at all stages of the life cycle and ensure the protection of their rights and self-determination of their life.

## 6. Recommendations

Following the above rationale and demonstration on the importance of adopting a life course approach in all aspects of gender equality and women's empowerment, a few recommendations can be made:

*a. The need for a new methodology integrating the life course approach in presenting, analyzing and discussing gender issues and the promotion of empowerment in women, such as:*

- Systematically disaggregating data by gender and by age groups with cohort comparison
- Designing Life Course modelling systems of equity levels
  - create modelization to address gender discrimination throughout the life cycle
  - develop case studies to exemplify: cumulative gender equality or inequality
- Development of a comprehensive Index on empowerment and gender equality
  - Indicator of gender inequality over the life course (i.e. cumulative index of poverty over life time)
  - mainstreaming levels of gender equity over the life course in other UN indicators
  - making sure no age groups are missing when tackling gender empowerment and life course

*b. The need to rethinking empowerment at 3 different levels:*

- Individual empowerment is crucial to human development and development issues
  - over the life course and life cycle with no age discrimination
  - self-development and self-realization including psychological and subjective aspects
  - the UN Women should address this missing component with specialists of human development such as psychologists or scientific NGOs organisations<sup>24</sup> to find new ways to address the psychological dimension of women empowerment.

*« It is critical for women to believe that they are worthy beings, have very unique gifts to offer that are desperately needed »  
Wendy Luhabe*

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24 For example, the Society for Psychological Study of Social Issues [www.spssi.org](http://www.spssi.org)



*one of the most influential business woman South Africa, New African Woman (no 6: 52-54)*

- **Family & community empowerment** allow to adopt a systemic approach to gender equality
  - empower mothers, grand-mothers and grand-grand-mothers and men as agents of change to improve the status of women
  - transgenerational sustainable effect of gender empowerment or disempowerment
- **Institutional & Policy must support women empowerment**
  - measures to be put in place and gender-sensitive legislation such as quota policy
  - a human right-based approach with a long life development approach should be part of UN women

c. Need for a structural time adjustment between religious-cultural rights and women's rights

- the burning issue of religious rights and women's right needs to enter a process of adjustment
- It is imperative to bring religious leaders to revisit women's rights and religious rights with women

**d. The imperative of mainstreaming a life course and life long approach to all UN issues concerning women**

- Assessing and addressing multiple discrimination of women over time
- Advantage vs Disadvantage Cumulative of equality and empowerment over the life course
- Integrating a Transgenerational aspect to gendered poverty, abuse, violence, suicides, etc
- The "Life Long..." aspect should be added in all agendas, especially in life long gender equality and life long empowerment but also in main UN themes such as: life long women's education, life long women's rights, life long reproductive health, life long eradication of poverty, life long employment, etc

Example: The Beijing Platform of Action: to integrate a life course perspective and life long vision, for example, older women are only mentioned once.

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