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Empowering Women: Strategies of Working with Female Workers

Submitted to: Department of Applied Social Studies, Hong Kong Polytechnic University

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To complete this thesis is not at all easy. Difficult times happened in between when I find myself too weak to continue. The loss of my dearest mother and the departure of my dear friend, was a trial in my life. To be able to complete this thesis, I have to express special gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Chan Kam Wah, who has been so patient and understanding. His thoughtful ideas inspired my thinking and analytical ability. Thanks to Dr. Henry Mok, who is always being helpful.

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Abstract

Abstract of thesis entitled "Empowering Women: Strategies of Working with Female Workers" submitted by To Kit Lai for the degree of Master of Philosophy at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in October, 2001.

In the last decade of the women's movement in Hong Kong, many empowerment programs and activities were carried out by organizations to empower grassroots women, aimed at strengthening their individual ability to policy change. Amongst the grassroots women, female workers especially middle age low income female workers were one of the target groups which women's organizations, non-government organizations and trade unions claimed to work toward their empowerment. Different strategies were adopted according to their conception of empowerment. Whether the different meaning of empowerment which adopted different strategies in working with female workers have different impact to the women and whether the empowering process is liberating to empower the women or is regulating to disempower them are the questions to be answered in this study. Therefore, the objectives of this study are firstly, to examine the organizers from a trade union, a non-government welfare organization and a women's organization, their conception towards empowerment and the strategies adopted. Secondly, is to examine the perception of the female workers toward their empowering experiences, in relation to their self perception and political and gender awareness. Thirdly, is to examine the power relations between the organizers and the female workers within the empowering process and the impact on the empowerment of the female workers. Finally, is to explore the possible alternative conception of empowerment and strategies and their application to the empowerment of female workers.
Liberal, structural and feminist perspective towards empowerment and Amy Allen’s framework (Allen, 1999) in conceiving power as resource, power as domination and power as empowerment is adopted for analyzing the organizers’ conception of empowerment. Karen Baistow’s (Baistow, 1994-95) discussion on the dilemma within the empowerment discourse as liberatory or regulatory provides a central focus to analyze the impact of the empowerment on female workers. Finally illuminated by the postmodern perspective on empowerment and Foucault’s conception of power, a redefinition of the meaning of empowerment and alternative strategies of working with female workers are proposed for future consideration.

The researcher was previously involved in the women’s organization that was being interviewed in this study as organizer for four years. Also, because of the previous working experiences with women workers, the researcher had some work contacts with the other two organizations namely the trade union and the welfare organization usually under the context of women’s coalition work. This links with the interviewed organizers had given the researcher a better position to build up trust and cooperation with them during the process of data collection.

Findings of the study indicated that the three organizations adopted a different conception of empowerment according to their political orientation and conception of power. In brief, the trade union adopted Marxist feminist perspective, the welfare organization adopted liberal feminist perspective and the women’s organization adopted socialist feminist perspective. Due to their difference in conceiving power they used different strategies to empower the women. Strategies ranging from self-help groups and social skills training programs to social action and advocacy work. These different strategies have specific impact to the female workers and the ways
they perceived their problems. Although from the subjective experiences of the female workers, the empowering programs did help to raise their self confidence and self efficacy to certain extend, the power relation between the female workers and the organizer/organization still remained oppressive. The organizers were the superior and the female workers as inferior within the working relationship. The empowerment experience became disempowering to the female workers under the liberal and structural perspectives on empowerment. The postmodern perspective on empowerment and Foucault’s conception of power illuminated to break the dilemma which rested in the power relation between the organizer and the female workers. Discussion on the alternative perspective on the concept of empowerment and for future strategizing to empower female workers is to conclude the study.
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I. Introduction

During the past decade, empowerment has emerged as a socially desirable construct and as an organizing principle for various forms of personal and social change which focus on exercising the ability to take control of one's life. The word "empowerment" has been widely used as a goal to be achieved by programs ranging from International Monetary Fund sponsored economic development projects to self directed community groups to collective action pressing for policy changes and structural transformation. The meaning of empowerment can be ranged from individual upward mobility to the gain of collective good. The definition of empowerment, however, still remains vague and ambiguous. Is it simply a new word substituting "enabling", which had been frequently used by professionals and politicians or is it something different?

The term "empowerment" concealing different meanings based upon different perspectives, practicing as strategies or intervention methods to those who are to be empowered, may have a different impact on the individual as well as the social situation. To summarize, there exists three different views towards empowerment in current discourse. Predominantly, the individual enhancement perspective, meaning to enable one's ability to overcome problems and the feeling of powerlessness by strengthening one's self esteem and developing skills to tackle the problems (Parsons, 1991). This perspective is widely adopted by liberals and within social work professionals, and non-government organizations as a primary goal to achieve in the process of intervention. Second, the structural perspective in which empowerment means to challenge and to combat the oppressive social relation so that the oppressed can regain his/her power. The forms of oppression based upon race, class, gender, age, disability,
sexual orientation, etc. embedded not only in behaviors, values, and attitudes of individuals and groups, but in institutions, structures and common sense assumptions (Ward and Mullender, 1991). Such a perspective is commonly shared amongst radical social workers, community organizers, social activists, radical feminists. Third, the post-structural/post-modern perspective, in which power is defined as a creative energy, it is the exercise of capacity, potential and competence. Empowerment is a process of liberation of self and others, as a life force where one works towards collective good (Hartsock, 1985; Van Den Bergh & Cooper, 1986). As Foucault (1982) says, power is not possessional, but relational. It is repressive and productive and power relations are conceived as permeating all levels of social existence – the ubiquity of power relations. Such conceptualization of empowerment is viewed by some postmodernist and postmodern feminists who analyses social relations to be diverse and against the binary analysis of oppression (Brown, 1995).

Judith Squires (Squires, 1999) and Amy Allen (Allen, 1999) further analyses within the above political perspectives, there are the different conceptions of power, referring to the notion of ‘power to’, ‘power over’ and ‘power with’. Squires summarizes the political perspectives into three different conception of power, namely ‘conflictual, capacity and practice conceptions of power. For Allen, she related the different feminist perspectives into conceiving power as domination, resource, and empowerment. This level of conception of power provides an analytical framework for us to further understand the meaning of empowerment, and its implication to the change process, the empowering relation between the empowerer and the empowered, and the social impact.
The different perspectives in viewing "empowerment" are not as clear cut nor may not be consciously aware in actual practice, yet they are embedded with different political meanings and when applied into change strategies, have diverse consequences and implications to the empowered individuals and to the social situation.

In Hong Kong, the word 'empowerment' has been frequently used in the last decade amongst women's organizations and community-based women's groups as their goal in working with grassroots women. The meaning of empowerment however varies according to the different political orientation and nature of the groups. It ranges from enabling women's ability to challenging the patriarchy and for structural change. The difference in meaning implies the diversity of strategies adopted to organize women. Female workers are one of the prominent target groups to be organized for empowerment due to their deprived social situation as women and as workers. Labor groups, trade unions, community development projects, welfare organizations and women's organizations are providing services and organizing programs for female workers aiming to 'empower' them. Yet, their definition of empowerment is very diverse and strategies applied may or may not necessarily lead to strengthening female workers. The lack of awareness of the definition of empowerment and unknowing the impact of the activities to female workers fails to provide a clear direction to the empowerment of female workers, thus weakens the development of grassroots women movement. This study therefore aims to look into the different empowerment strategies adopted by three organizations – a trade union, a welfare organization and a women's organization, which work with female workers under their own meaning of empowerment. Questions will be directed to three levels of analysis. Firstly, to explore the perception and understanding of term "empowerment" by the organizers from the
three organizations. Secondly, the female workers' perceptions toward the change process and their experiences of empowerment. Lastly, to understand the power relations between the organizer and the women participants within the specific organizational context. To conclude, the different understanding of the meaning of empowerment and their conception of power which determines the strategies adopted which create different impact to the empowerment of women participants will be discussed.

In Chapter II of this thesis, the definition of empowerment under different political theories and the conception of power will be discussed. Various concept of "empowerment" and the related conception of power under different theories will be analyzed. Theories related to women empowerment within the feminist discourse, namely liberal, radical, socialist, post-structural and postmodern feminism will be examined and critical issue related to the outcome of the empowering strategies as liberation or regulation to the working target/client will be discussed. The framework of analysis of this study will be outlined in this chapter. In Chapter III, a historical review of the women's movement in Hong Kong will be presented to give a background situation of the context in which women's empowerment strategies were emerged recently especially targeting to grassroots women empowerment. The rationale of this study is to explore the impact of the different empowerment strategies within such context and hopefully to give further insights to the future movement.

Research Objectives of this study derived from the previous concepts and discussion will be elaborated in Chapter IV. The research framework and the methodology of this study will be presented in Chapter V. The findings of the study will be presented in
Chapter VI, VII and VIII in which crucial data will be highlighted as reference for further analysis. In Chapter IX, the analysis of the data and discussion with reference to the different theories and the different conception of power will be presented. Finally in Chapter X, the conclusion of the study giving further insights to the empowerment strategies in working with female workers and its relation to the development of future movement is to be elaborated and concluded.
II. Empowerment and the Concept of Power

This Chapter is to present the theoretical framework of the study. Firstly, as the basis of understanding the empowerment discourse, the meaning of empowerment under different political theories and feminist conceptions is presented in the first two sections of this chapter. These theories are embedded with different conceptions of power which is to be presented in the third section for the way they conceive power and the power relations implies the different strategies adopted to empower women. The impact of the strategies can be both empowering and disempowering. In fact, as the author has noticed, there exists two kinds of relations within the empowerment process, one is the external relation, that is the social relation of the empowered and the other relation is the internal relation, which is the relation between the empowerer and the empowered. The empowered cannot be liberated from oppression if the internal relation is not liberatory. However, there exists a paradoxical relation between the empowered and the empowerer, for if the relation is regulatory than liberatory, the empowerment process can be disempowering. Karen Baistow (Baistow, 1994) has pointed out this dilemma and the debate is to be discussed in the fourth section of this chapter. In the final section, the framework of analysis of this study based on the above theoretical background is presented.

2.1 Empowerment Discourse

Many social work and human service literature trying to define the term “empowerment” according to their political/professional orientation. The concept has had a considerable impact upon the nature of social care practice, a ‘buzz’ word in the
late 80s, and become more popular in the 90s as a term used to reflect the nature of social care. The definition of the term has become a site for political debate as related to the direction and strategies in working with the socially deprived/oppressed group in society and toward social change.

As within the context of Hong Kong, the word "empowerment" has been widely used amongst professionals, community workers and women's organizations recently. Yet the term is vaguely defined and sometimes has been colonized by the professional social workers as restricted to individual enabling or for a certain political purpose in order to individualize the problem for further blaming the victim. Very few local literatures have researched into the meaning of the term and its effect on the practice application. Some researches have been carried out to understand and to explore the situation of female workers, their needs and problems (Lai L.L et al, 1997; Mak S.C. 1999; Westwood R. 1995; Leung L.C. 1998; Ng S.H.1986; Yau B.L.L. 1992) yet very few studies have done to research into the integration of the empowerment theory and its effect on practice and to the empowered targets, especially related to female workers who participated in those empowerment programs.

The meaning of empowerment lies in the definition of "power" and the understanding of the "power relations". Staples, and social work theorists, define it as a process, 'to empower' means, "the process by which power is gained, developed, seized, facilitated, or given. An individual or group moves from a condition of relative powerlessness to relative powerfulness through the empowerment process." (Staples, 1990). It refers to an ongoing capacity of individuals or groups to act on their own behalf to achieve a greater measure of control over their lives and destinies. Individual
empowerment occurs through the process of personal development, which entails both the growth of skills, abilities as well as a more positive self-definition. Gutierrez, with a feminist perspective, elaborates, "empowerment is a process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals can take action to improve their life situation." (Gutierrez, 1990)

However, the question goes back to, "How do we conceive power and power relations when we are to empower the powerless?" "How do we understand the causation of powerlessness and how can the powerless be empowered?" In the recent era, it is a word widely used, or even to a degree, colonized by different authority from local to international level. This ranges from local health authority in their health programs, by the government in the welfare guidelines, by the international agencies such as World Bank, International Monetary Fund, in their community development programs in the Third World, by psychologists and social workers in their intervention process, by social activists, by feminists in their social actions. Human service literature reflects great disparity in the meaning of the term under different analogy of the powerless phenomenon.

Some emphasis on the individual enhancement aspect, as assuming that personal growth brings about empowerment, as Dubois and Krogstrup Miley (Dubois & Krogstrup, 1992) defined within a social work/psychological intervention context, "a process of releasing the potential and strengths of social systems and discovering and creating resources and opportunities for promoting adaptive social functioning in the client system's resolution of problems, issues and needs." Kate Young also criticized the concept of empowerment widely used as a goal of economic development projects.
refers mainly to entrepreneurial self reliance. Taking a critical view of the use of empowerment terminology by development agencies, Young stated, “The term echoes the general emphasis within the mainstream on unleashing the capacity of individuals to be more intrepreneurial, more self reliant. It is closely allied to the current emphasis on individualistic values: people 'empowering themselves' by pulling themselves up by their bootstraps.” (Karl, 1995)

Even with the understanding of structural causation of powerlessness, there could be different conception of empowerment according to one's political meaning of "power". Functionalist sociologists such as Parsons conceptualized power in society as a variable sum. According to this perspective, the total amount of power in society is not fixed but variable; power resides with members of society as a whole, and power can increase in society as a whole, as that society pursues collective goals. The logic of such a position is that the "empowerment" of the powerless could be achieved within the existing social order. They could be empowered and could share the fruits of the development, alongside those who had already achieved power. With the gift of knowledge and resources, the powerless could gain tools for self-reliance and be empowered. (Thomas, 1992) This perception oversimplifies the effect of the powerful over the powerless, and did not answer the question of how can the powerless be accessible to the resources and knowledge that is crucial to their empowerment, if such resources are given from the top to the bottom, then, the control is still within the discretion of the powerful, without fundamentally changing the imbalance of power relations. Empower may in this conception, mean enabling, but the power distribution had not be altered, or may even further reinforce the existing structural inequalities.
If power is conceptualized in zero-sum terms, "empowerment" means the increase of power of one group/groups resulting in the decrease of the power of other groups. Weber's definition of power involved the ability of one or more individuals/groups to realize their will, even against the resistance of others. According to such perspective, empowerment of the powerless would involve gains which would, have to be achieved from the powerful, although such gains could be negotiated as part of wider strategies for social reform. This conception of empowerment implies the consensus model of dealing of imbalance of power conflict, it can bring stability to the system at the expense of the powerless by preserving the powerful's position yet without tackling the root causes of structural inequalities.

For the Marxist perspective on power, political power in capitalist society cannot ultimately be separated from economic power, the power associated with capitalist interests. The empowerment of the powerless has inherently limited possibilities under capitalism. Structural transformation is the crucial liberation of the powerless to regain power. It also involves the challenge to the ideological hegemony which Gramsci developed to analyze the ways in which existing power come to be seen as legitimate and non-contestable within capitalistic society. Empowerment in this sense is about collective, community and ultimately class conscientization, Freire's approach to adult education - to understand reality critically in order to use the power which even the powerless possess to challenge the powerful and ultimately transform that reality through conscious political struggles. (Craig & Mayo, 1995)

Further expanding the Marxist conflict model based on class, the term "oppression" is used to describe the exploitative nature of economic and social relationships that exist
in society in the radical stream (Kidd & Kumar, 1981). According to Lukes (1974), "power is the capacity not only to impose one's will, if necessary against the will of other parties, but also to set the terms of the argument, including at the national and international level." Ward and Mullender (1991) defined "Oppression can be understood both as a state of affairs in which life chances are constructed, and as the process by which this state of affairs is created and maintained". As a state of affairs is the presumption in favor of men, white people, and other dominant groups, which skews all social relationships and is encoded in their very structure. (Fine et al. 1985) It is revealed at both micro and macro level. Oppression is the process by which groups or individuals with ascribed or achieved power (the oppressor) unjustly limit the lives, experiences and opportunities of groups or individuals with less power (the oppressed). Oppression can occur along any number of dimensions, on the basis of class, race, gender disability, age and sexual orientation and is permeated by relations of domination and subordination. (Dominelli, 1988)

To empower the oppressed, the role of consciousness raising then becomes crucial in awakening people to their enslavement and in freeing them to choose active opposition in its stead. Ward and Mullender (1991) strongly criticized the term "empowerment" being colonized by social work professionals as enabling or the pursuit of individual good and reiterated that once empowerment becomes disengaged from anti-oppressive objectives it loses its radical potential becoming little more than a rather imprecise term which can be employed with equal comfort by people from different parts of the political spectrum.
2.2 Feminists Conceptualization

The oppositional, binary conception of power relations is widely adopted by feminists who view women, a social and cultural constructed identity based on sex, situated in the male-dominated society, are under unequal power relations between male and female, facing oppression in all walks of life. There exist multiple feminists views and varying definitions on empowerment.

Widely adopted in the 60s, liberal feminists perceive men and women as having essentially the same potentials for achievement. Gender inequality is due to social conditions that hindered women’s development, denial of their equal opportunity based on their sex. Thus the issue is not oppression, but the denial of equal opportunity and freedom of individual to choose their life course (Friedan, 1977). To empower women, women should become more competitive, assertive, individualistic, and self directed (Nes & Iadicola, 1989). It emphasizes the equal treatment in the public sphere rather than in the private sphere, such as in the 18th century, attacking the barriers to women’s education and economic opportunities. In the 19th century, the access to citizenship rights, etc. (Saulnier, 1996).

Such perception was being criticized for it negates difference between men and women and that the claim that women are the same as men too often makes maleness and masculinity both the reference point and the desired state of being (Browne, 1995).

In the late 70s, under radical feminism, “power” is defined as hierarchical domination between the oppressor and the oppressed under patriarchy. Patriarchy is defined as the institutionalized system of male dominance and control over women. “The Personal is
political” is one of the key ideas for individual women’s experiences of injustice and the miseries that women think of as personal problems are actually political issues, grounded in sexist power imbalances. Self transformation therefore is essential for women to be liberated from the patriarchy. The public and private systems function in dynamic interaction to oppress women. Patriarchy is a universal feature of all social systems, and all other systems of oppression - class, race, age and the like, find their roots in patriarchy. The core values of radical feminism are integrity or wholeness of personality beyond the gender distinctions of patriarchy; Gynergy - power of being women as defined by women; equality resulting from the elimination of patriarchy; decentralized, participatory; direct democracy and sexual freedom (Dworkin, 1976; Raymond, 1981). To empower women, is to strive for women’s self-determination, in all aspects of life including sexual freedom and reproduction. It is through non-violent feminist revolution to eliminate gender distinction and abolish sex role stereotyping. Such a revolution might begin with consciousness raising, and self transformation to promote the redefinition of personal problems as political issues, and eventually mobilize collective movement against the patriarchy for social transformation and bringing women together in sisterhood (Saulnier, 1996). The women of color - notably black women, challenge this assumption of shared oppression based on gender, and criticize the notion of sex as the most significant division of power, which ignores or undermines the equally fundamental oppressive structure of race and class. To them, is another form of domination of the white women over women of color, middle class women over lower class. (Collins, 1990) Postmodern feminists such as Gould (Gould, 1988) criticize such analysis as essentialist which describe women as having core qualities that are different from those of men - often described in terms of being nurturant, peaceful, cooperative, morally and politically conscious (Gilligan, 1982).
Labeling certain qualities as feminine may be "bottling old wine in new bottles." The result of which is homogenization of women that ignores the diversity of women and women experiences.

Socialist feminists encompass diverse perspectives. The major differences involve where the roots of oppression lie for women. Orthodox Marxist feminists contend that the primary form of oppression in capitalist society is class oppression, of which other forms of oppression are historical derivations (Engel, 1972). That under capitalism, workers are ruled by the owning class who control the means of production and the labor of the workers. Engels added to Marx's ideas an analysis of women's place in capitalism. He traced the origin of the traditional nuclear family to the origin of private property. He maintained that women and men both had core roles in the maintenance of the nuclear family, but since women's traditional duties involved housekeeping and food preparation, and men's involved procuring food, owning and commanding slaves, and owning the tools, men accumulated more wealth than women did. This made men's position more important and that men had the impulse to exploit their position, overthrown women and ensure the inheritance of their children (Engels, 1972). However, his concern was class not women. The liberation of women will follow by the workers' liberation and the transformation of the capitalist mode of production. Many trade unionists still hold on to the Marxist feminist position, thus putting women's liberatory work as secondary to class struggle.

Many socialist feminists were dissatisfied with Marx's virtual neglect of women and Engel's insufficient analysis of women's oppression (Rubin, 1974). Recent socialist feminists including both the dual system theorists and unified system theorists on class
and gender (Saulnier, 1996), take the position of two separate but interlocked spheres of oppression: class oppression which is rooted in the production of things and sex oppression, rooted in the production of people, inequality is rooted in systems of class and patriarchy. The dual system theorists examine class oppression and sexual oppression separately, as parallel but often interacting systems. Unified systems theorists seek to explain oppression in terms of a single, overarching system with multiple facets, such as sex, class and race oppressions, with the facets intersecting in various ways within the single system.

Socialist feminists define patriarchy as a set of social relations which has a material base in which there are hierarchical relations between men and solidarity among them which enable them in turn to dominate women. The material base is men's control over women's labor power, excluding women from access to necessary economically productive resources and by restricting women's sexuality (Hartmann, 1981). Women empowerment means the fundamental change as a result of struggle between the dominant and dominated groups within each sphere and as a result of the conflict that may develop as the aims of those who dominate in each sphere conflict. So whether capitalism and patriarchy are dual systems or a single, unified one, for socialist feminists, the elimination of sex oppression generally include two key fronts: that is socialization of housework and child care, and increasing women's wages. Thus, socialist feminists in empowering women, consider organizing to raise consciousness and coalition building. Each group is organized to meet their physical (similar to needs of all animals) and species needs (needs unique to their species, such as human need to think, create, imagine, love, companionship, etc.) in ways that are alternative to the existing system of domination. They believe, organizing women and the poorest women because they
are the most exploitative is the priority. The focus of work to empower women, most important lower class women focus on issues of: 1) access to work; 2) supporting families as they are currently structured; and 3) making public institutions more attuned to families with a particular focus on the most vulnerable, that is, the poorest families. Strategies to organize both women and men around those issues that reflect the contradictions between the modes of production and reproduction is crucial, such as women’s wages, maternity leave, childcare provisions, lower class women unemployment, minimum working hours for working women, etc. (Saulnier, 1996).

Some feminists have criticized the theory for their failure to see gender as a fundamental category constituting individual and social relations. Postmodern feminists questioned such analysis as universalizing, terming “metanarratives”, they are internal to the structures of the discourses themselves and thus historical and subject to change. They then sought to deconstruct these “grand theories” and to develop new theoretical approaches which insist on historical and geographical specificity and no longer claim universal status.

Rooted in Structuralism and poststructuralism, postmodernism, a cultural phenomenon that sprang to life in architecture and spread rapidly into literature, art, and other areas, together with deconstructionism and French feminism, has stimulated and transformed feminist thinking and practices in the past decade. The theory encompasses a wide range of revolutionary concepts, deconstruct the meaning of language, differences, multiple discourse, and its critique to logocentricism. Here, the author may only discuss the theory in relation to the concept of power and women’s empowerment.
Postmodern feminism provokes reconceptualization of the concept of power, and focus on the elimination of false dichotomies of capitalistic, patriarchal, hierarchical society for it creates oppositional and zero-sum relationships. Instead, a continuous and wholistic perspective is preferred (Van Den Bergh and Cooper, 1986). 'Power' is defined as a creative energy in contrast to the traditional definition of domination, coercion, or personal advancement (Hartsock, 1985). It is the exercise of capacity, and potential and can be explained in its relations between people. For Foucault, the power is not reducible to any one source, it is a relationship which inheres in material discursive practices. Power is both repressive and productive, it produces effect and creates self policing subjects. Individuals are both subject to the constraints and also take up a position of subject in and through these constrains. Yet power also creates resistance (Weedon, 1997). Empowerment springs up when people come together and act, and its legitimacy comes from the act of creating community. Some postmodern feminists see liberatory experiences as empowerment instead of a zero sum power relation, and stress the recognition of difference to challenge homogenizing all women as the first step.

Thus the point of having power over another is to liberate the other rather than to dominant and kill, empower instead of overpower (Browne, 1995). Under such a perspective, the postmodern feminist conceptualization of empowerment often begins with social relatedness, energy, capacity and an emphasis on community good. It is a process of liberation of self and others, as a life force, a potential, a capacity growth and energy where one works toward community and connection responsibly as opposed to working primarily toward one's individual good (Browne, 1995).
Under the different political perspectives, the understanding of empowerment is different. As each of the theories have their own conception of power which leads to a different definition of ‘empowerment’, we now turn to look into the various discussion on the conceptions of power and its relation to the different political perspectives.

2.3 The Conception of Power and Empowerment

Empowerment literally means “becoming powerful”. The central question is “How we define power” determines our conception towards empowerment, which as a result, if applied in the practice will affect our framing of the strategies and have different implications to the empowering process as well as to the empowered and the empowerer. So with such an understanding, the conceptual framework of empowerment is determined by the concept of power, and thus, in this section, the different conception of power within the feminist discourse will be discussed.

Current discussion on conception of power and its relation to existing feminist theories have different ways of conceptualization. Judith Squires (Squires, 1999) proposed three different understandings of power, namely the conflictual conceptions of power, the capacity conceptions and the practice conceptions. The conflictual conceptions view power as ‘power over’, the domination of the ‘have’ and the ‘have nots’. Power is conceived as a possession and zero-sum. The capacity conceptions of power view power as ‘power to’, as Hannah Arendt argued that power is not a zero-sum, it springs up whenever people act in concert. It is neither conflictual as it arises when people work together rather than when they act against others. The capacity is possessed by groups and not individuals, power is a collective phenomenon but also a relational one (Arendt, 1968). The practice conceptions of power is elaborated by Michel Foucault,
as conceiving power as a more complex relation. Power is repressive as well as productive, it permeates at all levels of social existence and it generates effects. The productivity of power may either constrain or enable, or both, like preventative power, it can be disciplinary or enabling. This conception of power give new insights to the feminists conception of power and the strategy to empower women. As Squires concluded, "the strategy of inclusion here entails adopting a conflictual conception of power. The strategy of reversal entails the positing of a capacity conception of power. The strategy of displacement, here specifically drawing on the work of Foucault, reveals both the conflictual and the capacity conceptions to be mutually constitutive and equally restrictive." (Squires, 1999).

Sharing the similar discussion on the conceptions of power within the feminist discourse is illustrated in Amy Allen’s *The Power of Feminist Theory* (Allen, 1999). Allen provides a framework of conceptualizing power in different feminist perspectives, conceiving power as resource, power as domination and power as empowerment. She concluded adopting the Foucauldian conception of power and synthesizing three senses of power, that is ‘power over’, ‘power to’, and ‘power with’. The three senses represent analytically distinguishable features of a situation and may all be present in one interaction. Further discussion and elaboration of Allen’s analysis to the conception of power in relation to the findings of the study will be dealt with in Chapter VII on data analysis.

According to Allen’s framework to conceive power by different feminist perspective, there exists the conception of power as resource, power as domination and power as empowerment. As for conceiving power as resource, liberal feminists developed their
conception on power from John Stuart Mill’s ‘the Subjection of Women’ viewing power as a resource and that women should have in amounts equal to men, in the access of resources and in political power. It is crucial for women to regain the equality of opportunity with respect to political power and in resources, and that the familial burden are to be equally distributed. Okin pointed out,

"when we look seriously at the distribution between husbands and wives of such critical social goods as work, power, prestige, self-esteem, opportunities for self development, and both physical and economic security, we find socially constructed inequalities between them, right down the list.” (Okin, 1989)

The goal to equality is to redistribute power by redistributing labor in the family and other social goods. So under this conception of power, empowerment means to redistribute social goods, resources and political power. Women need to acquire more skills and to be more competent and capable in order to reach an equal status with men. Resources to lessen women from familial burden and to obtain more opportunities for women to develop their capacity is necessary to empower women. This conception has been criticized for over-simplifying the nature of power, and that power is not simply a good but a relation, and that the analysis is being too static, and dyadic.

The second conception of power, as conceiving power as domination is mostly adopted by mainstream radical feminists. They conceive power as a relation of domination and subordination. Therefore the goal is not a redistribution of power but a dismantling of the system of male domination and female subordination under the patriarchy. The differences between men and women are simply the reified effects of dominance. As Pateman stated, “the patriarchal construction of the difference between masculinity and
femininity is the political difference between freedom and subjection” (Pateman, 1988).

It is the relation between the powerful and the powerless.

This domination conception of power is adopted by radical feminism and socialist feminism in which the former perceive women under the domination of the patriarchy, and that male 'power over' female. It also analyses a latent form of power that works to repress women, in both private and public sphere. The idea of 'the personal is political' is to unveil that individual women's experiences of injustice and the miseries that women think of as personal problems are actually political issues, grounded in sexist power imbalances. For socialist feminism, there exists both class and sex oppression to women and inequality is rooted in systems of class and patriarchy. To resist domination, both radical feminists and socialist feminists need to transform the system which is embedded with male and class domination. Thus empowerment to women means women have to gain power by both self transformation and structural transformation. Consciousness raising and collective actions are necessary as strategies for social transformation.

The third feminist conception of power under Allen's framework is the conception of power as empowerment. This conception emphasizes the power of the powerless, the power that women are able to exercise. Feminists with such conception of power acknowledge that women under the patriarchal societies are subordinate to male dominance, but they focus on the power of women as the ability to empower and transform oneself, others and the world. This conception is based on the understanding that women have special skills and traits, such as care and maintenance of relationships with other adults, is the strength that embedded in their social roles. This maternal and
care perspective provide the basis for a new way to think of power, as Jean Baker Miller pointed out, "women's examination of power...can bring new understanding to the whole concept of power" (Miller, 1992). Carol Gilligan (Gilligan, 1982) believes that when women moral development reaches to the highest stage, in terms of care, they learn to integrate care for themselves with care for others, they thereby experience a sense of empowerment. This conception suggests that women experience of power is not one domination or control but of ability, capacity and individual empowerment, to conceive power as 'power to'. Thus, power is capacity or creative ability to pursue certain life projects. To empower women under this conception is therefore to develop the feminine traits of care, nurture and relationships and to generate the strength of women through these practices.

This conception, however, has been criticized to be problematic for feminists to valorize and label as feminist practices that have been defined within the context of male dominance. That such conception and practices does not resolve the problem of male dominance and it fails to analyze sufficiently the fact that empowering to women are developed in and through a dialectical relationship with male dominance.

These different conceptions of power as pointed out by Allen, each overemphasize one aspect of power. This one-sidedness is problematic in a sense that it obscures the other forms of domination and subordination such as class, race and sexual orientation that are intertwined with women's subordination. Secondly, it fails to address the complex and multifarious power relations in which women are situated, that women can be both dominated and empowered at the same time and in the context of one and the same norm, institution and practice. (Allen, 1999).
Several feminists have sought new conceptions of power within the feminist perspectives on the understanding of power and empowerment. Foucault’s analysis on the concept of power has given much insights to the breakthrough. Elshtain (Elshtain, 1992) proposed an alternative way of conceptualizing power. She developed the power notion between the protestas (the Latin would for political power, control, supremacy and domination) and protentia (the word for power as ability, potency and efficacy). Elshtain invokes a non-dichotomous approach to the concept of power, that it can be both as domination and capacity which is similar to Foucault’s conception of power, that power is not only repressive but productive. Individuals are both subject to the constraints and also take up a position of a subject in and through these constraints. (Foucault, 1982) It is a concept of viewing power as empowerment in which power both prohibits and produces, produces by prohibiting and prohibits by producing. It is a form of resistance against domination and the ability to transform oneself, others and the world. Modern power is present in all social relations, it is omnipresent.

To bring it further, as Yeatman elaborated, there are both democratic and undemocratic force within the power discourse, especially relating to the state invention through legislation. She stated,

"a feminist counter-discourse of women as subjects of power, capable of exercising the full range of agentic capacities, including that of violence, can come into being only in the context of the development of a democratic state which respects, not simply protects, the rights of women. Such a state constitutes women as agents in their own right who are entitled to the status of a rights-
"bearing person. " (Yeatman, 1997)

This has given a view that the state intervention is not necessarily repressive, but if under democratic force, can be a source of power for women and their liberation.

Amy Allen (Allen, 1999) also brings out the point that the one-sided approach of power, either as domination or capacity is incomplete. In her discussion, she stated,

"conceptions of power that have a one-sided focus either on male domination or female empowerment miss the ways in which some women play integral roles in the subordination of others, and in which different women are differently empowered by particular practices. To make sense of these phenomena, feminists need a varied, nuanced conception of power that overcomes such conceptual one-sidedness."

Further to that, she stated,

"feminists need a conception of power that will illuminate the interplay between domination and empowerment; only such a conception will be conceptually complex enough to illuminate the multifarious relations of power that feminists seek both to critique and to transform." (Allen, 1999)

She cited an example of being mothers, can experience empowerment through the practice of transforming, nurturing and empowering their children, while at the same time being subject to the power of male domination, in the guise of a male-dominated medical profession, oppressive or abusive husbands, and/or structural disadvantage labor market, etc. According to her view, as similar to the conception of power of Foucault, that domination and empowerment are always intertwined with respect to the
subject; one is always subject to relations of domination and yet simultaneously empowered to take up the position of a subject in and through that subjection. Thus, according to her view,

"**power-over, power-to, power-with are not best understood as distinct types or forms of power; rather, they represent analytically distinguishable features of a situation, they may all be present in one interaction.**" (Allen, 1999)

Allen further introduces a methodological approach in the study of power. The two primary analytical perspectives, namely the foreground perspective and the background perspective. The foreground perspective targets particular power relations between individuals or groups of individuals. The background perspective focuses on the background social conditions that allow these particular power relations to appear. It examines the subject positions, cultural meanings, practices, institutions, and structures that make up the context within which particular power relations are able to emerge. This methodological approach can be used for the study of power as well as within the empowerment context, such as the power relation between the empowered and the empowerer, the empowerment practice стратегии, and the impact on the empowered. Both the foreground and background perspectives can be applied for understanding and analyzing the specific case of empowerment practice.

The conception of power is a critical issue within the feminist discourse and also within the empowerment of women. In this study on the empowerment strategies of working with women, the conceptual framework to examine the existing practices and their conception towards power is crucial. The conception of power of the organization to empower women determines their strategies and at the same time, produces outcome
and effect to the women being empowered. To find out the actual impact on the women during the empowering process, the effects on them and the relations between the empowerer and the empowered will give some insights to future strategies to the empowerment of women and direction to act within the women’s movement.

2.4 Paradoxes of Empowerment: Liberation or Regulation?

Although ‘empowerment practice’ carry out in a wide range of context, in economic development projects, social welfare practice, consciousness raising and self directed groupwork, psychological therapeutic practice, etc., questions emerged in its paradoxical existence, that the practices of empowerment may have regulatory as well as liberatory potential, or may be either or.

This is a significant discussion as echoing the previous conception of power. As refer to Foucault’s conception of power, that power can be repressive and productive, that the subject can be subjected to as well as being the subject of, the relationship between the empowerer and the empowered also resembles such power relation in the empowerment process. In fact, in practice, this is a critical issue when one is to empower women and yet at the same time, be the subject to dominate the empowered. The complexity of the relationship, if not consciously aware of and find alternative strategies to overcome, may create disempowerment instead of empowerment in actual practice.

Karen Baistow (Baistow, 1994) raised the query, first regarding the recent emphasis on the development of personal power, the individualistic upward mobility of defining
empowerment and the related practice. Empowerment typically defined as “a process by which individuals, groups and/or communities become able to take control of their circumstances and achieve their goals, thereby being able to work towards maximizing the quality of their lives.” (Adams, 1990) Such conception speaking in the language of radical politics resorted to orthodox, individualizing the problem. A shift in the conceptualization of the relationship between the ‘personal’ and the ‘political’. The focus is on promoting the development of cognitive strategies and behavior skills which will enable people to experience themselves as being in control, of being able to make a different to their own lives. (Fawcett, et al; 1984; Parsons, 1991; Smith, 1991; Tones, 1991; Wallerstein, 1992) Proposed solution resort to groupwork, counseling, and income generating activities without further taking actions for community involvement and participation. In fact the two are reciprocally related. The professionals are manipulating the term empowerment to their needs, that if you are unable to do it for yourself, then you may need professional assistance in doing so.

This poses the second criticism that ‘to empower’ has lost its reflexive meaning in the recent welfare context. It is something that is done to you by others, or that you do to others who thus become empowered by your actions not their own. Empowering others is not only good for the empowered, but also good for the ‘empowerer’.

Paradoxically, the empowering process of service users becomes disempowered by professionals and organizers and thus need to reclaim their rights and self-determination.

To counter such trend, empowerment in this case might involve power being taken out of the hands of professionals and restored to ordinary welfare users. Langan and Lee (Langan & Lee, 1989) suggested that the key concept to come out of the movement was the “empowerment of the consumer”, meaning the process of transferring the
power of social workers back to the people deprived of power. Ramon (Ramon, 1991) stated, "for real empowerment to happen, power would have to be diverted away from the number of groups, including professionals, informal carers, friends, central and local government and voluntary activists."

The above criticisms rested in the assumption of a zero-sum power relationship between the 'empowered' and the 'empowerer'. The author's view is the process of empowerment is dynamic and changing, the regulatory nature of the working relationship may be transformed as the users regained power. The matter is how, under what sort of practice and accountable measures that could ultimately liberate the users to take control of their lives. Another irony is, deciding who should be empowered is a sign of power also. Therefore, users should have the right to define their position, their needs and whether to be empowered and through what the process will be and what preferably outcome.

Baistow (Baistow, 1994) raised some crucial questions to this paradoxical dilemma within the empowerment discourse: How do we know if empowerment intentions and practices really are empowering? How do you know you are being, or have been empowered? Or that your actions are empowering others? Can Empowerment practices be evaluated and if so, how? This poses the two important issues that need to be addressed - one is that the evaluation of the empowerment practice and the other is the significance of the users views and experiences of empowerment.

Taking into consideration of the power control between the 'empowered' and the 'empowerer', some suggested the nature of the relationship to be characterized by the
‘side by side’ realignment and ‘partnership’ with balance of power and accountability to be incorporated into the practice. The significance of this research is aiming therefore to articulate the empowering process of women and their relationship with the organizers with various background or position, namely a non-government organization, a trade union and a women’s organization, each having their own political ideology and understanding toward the concept of empowerment.

Empowerment could give voice to the vital personal and collective dissatisfactions that are salient features of many people’s lives and which are frequently associated with experiences of exclusive, invisibility and powerlessness to exert control over one’s destiny. The question lies in whether and how it can survive as a construct with critical potential and avoid being manipulative as a tool in the kitbag of the professional. The actual problems and dilemmas within practice using different empowerment strategies will be discussed later in this study with its relevancy to the findings on the feedback from the organizers, the women and their power relations.

2.5 Framework of Analysis of the Study

This study is based on an understanding that all empowering agents have their own definition of empowerment and this definition is translated according to their political perspective and feminist orientation. Their conceptions of power under the different political perspectives such as conceiving power as resource, as domination or as empowerment according to Allen’s framework (Allen, 1999), determine the main strategies they adopt to empower women.

During the empowerment process, there exists two kinds of power relations. One is the
external relation which is the power relation between the women and the wider social context. Women is situated in a relatively powerless situation due to the imbalance of power caused by the lack of resources, or oppressed by patriarchy or capitalism according to one's political orientation and conception of power. The women participated in the activities and experience the process, her subjective evaluation of that change is one of the key aspect of data collection in this study.

The other is the internal relation that rests within the empowering relationship, between the empowerer and the empowered. As related to this study, is the organizer/organizing agent and the female workers participated in the empowerment programs and activities. Strategies to empower female workers are often aiming at tackling the external relation, to strengthen the women or to change the external social relation. Yet, the internal relation is often undermined and may create disempowering effect to the female workers. This can be a paradoxical relation as the female workers are to be empowered by the organizers thus their position is still in subordination to the organizers.

What is the impact of the empowering work to female workers, both to the external relation and the internal relation under the different political perspectives of the organizing agents is another aspect to examine in this study. The framework of this study is therefore, to simplify into an analytical diagram as below.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition of Empowerment</th>
<th>Strategies adopted to empower female workers</th>
<th>External Relation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Impact:

Liberatory or Regulatory?

Internal Relation

From the above framework, the data collection and analysis of the study is based on the three aspects of empowering female workers. First, is the conception of empowerment by the empowering agents. This includes how the organizers and the organizations conceive of 'women's empowerment', what are their objectives in empowering the women, what strategies they adopted and the obstacles they encountered during the process. In fact, there may exist disparity on the conception of empowerment between the organization and the organizer, for the organizer may not necessarily agree with the organization's practices in empowering female workers, which reflected how the organization conceives of women's empowerment. However, although disparity exists, the organizer would most of the time have to work in line with or to conform to the organizational goals and strategies adopted. Therefore, even though there may be differences, the main strategy and conception on empowerment is still rested with the organization. Thus, the organizing agents which includes both the organizer and the organization is to be taken into consideration in this study.
As a matter of fact, this issue was identified during the course of interviewing the organizers. It was brought up by the organizers during the interviews and that they had to work within the limits of such disparities since they were the one to represent and to carry out the organizations' directions and goals. This is the present cultural situation within the Hong Kong context, that the organizers are very much working according to the organizational direction and they have to abide to the values and principles of the organizations. Otherwise they would not be able to continue their work or facing negative feedback to carry forward their work.

The second aspect to examine in this study is the perception of the women towards the empowering process. This includes how they perceive their situation before and after participating in the programs/activities, what they were their involvement and how they perceive the change, if any, the obstacles they encountered during the process and how they overcome those problems. Their awareness in gender equality is also an area which would be highlighted for within the Hong Kong context, gender awareness raising effort is not often been neglected within the women's movement especially in the organizing work with grassroots women.

The third aspect is focused on the power relation between the organizers and the female workers. This includes how the organizers perceive their working relationship with the female workers in the empowering process, how the female workers perceive their relationship with the organizers during the participation of the programs and activities, what are the problems, both the organizers and the female workers perceive within the empowering relationship and how they overcome these problems.
This framework provides a dynamic analysis of the empowering strategies of female workers in which both the empowering agents and the female workers perceptions on empowerment as well as the power relation that was embedded within the empowering relationship will be examined and analyzed. The impact of the empowerment strategies in working with female workers is therefore to be evaluated which hope to give insights for future empowerment strategies with women in the women's movement especially in working with grassroots women.

'Empowerment' has been a key word widely used within NGOs, trade unions and women organizations recently in the community service sector in Hong Kong during the past decade. The historical development of the women's movement thus will give a background to one's understanding of the situation of women's work in Hong Kong which the studied organizations are situated. The characteristics of the women's movement and its impact to women's empowerment will be highlighted in the next chapter giving a contextual analysis of women empowerment work in the local situation.
III. The Women's Movement in Hong Kong and Women's Empowerment

Women's empowerment is a process to strengthen women from a powerless and unequal position to a relatively more powerful and equal condition. No matter there exists diversity in the understanding of the causes of inequality and powerlessness, owing to the lack of social opportunities or the patriarchy, or capitalism, the deprivation of women on individual and structural level is a fact that has to be acknowledged. To combat this disadvantaged position of women largely depends on the effort of the actions taken by women themselves and their transformation through the empowerment process. The women's movement which signifies the collective effort, mainly mobilized by women, which are concerned with the improvement of the situation of women against their disadvantaged situation therefore is aiming at women's empowerment.

In this chapter, an overview of the women's movement in Hong Kong is a prerequisite for a contextual understanding the empowering work of women and female workers. It is also due to such context, that the need for studying the strategies of empowering female workers is important. The local characteristics of the movement and its impact on the empowerment of women especially female workers will be presented in order to give a critical understanding of the present situation of women's work and the problems that encountered in empowering women within the movement.
An Historical Account of the Women’s Movement

A number of articles have reviewed on the development of the women’s movement in Hong Kong. (Ho, 1990; Tsang, 1995, Lai, Au and Cheung, 1997). Under the different focus of concern, the movement was being analyzed into different stages. Here, in order to update the development, the author is to account the history of the movement development in four stages.

The first stage that marked the beginning of the voice of women came from the effort of the Hong Kong Council of Women formed in 1947. Its platform contained a wide range of concerns, but the general aim was to eradicate all forms of discrimination against women, in law, economic activities, and social status. (Tsang, 1995) Issues that prominently received societal concern and carried a great impact to the mobilization of social forces were the abolition of the legally sanctioned polygamous system in 1971, the separation of taxation between husbands and wives and the campaign for equal work equal pay. The work of the Council was inspired by the wave of Western feminism in the 60s and the 70s. It was mainly consisted of members who were most expatriate women and professionals with the commitment to empower women through these policies reform. In the late 70s, the Council elaborated a more grassroots orientation and campaigned vigorously on paid maternity leave as a recognition of women’s rights and contribution, and promoting public concern on issues related to women and law, violence, media, health and education. In the 80s, the Council launched activities and researches which raised societal concern on the problem of violence against women running “War on Rape” and “Against Wife Abuse”. Later in 1985, 1986, two women service organization were set up, a women’s refuge for
battered wives, Harmony House and the Women's Centre, which was a women's resource centre providing hot-lines and counseling and developing programs for individual empowerment of women.

In the 80s, the women's movement entered into a localized stage with a number of women's groups with feminist orientation established. The active students and social movement in the 70s created a liberal atmosphere. Also, the new generation born under the colonial rule, and educated under the influence of the western culture, began to develop a different perspective from the traditional. A group of women who had studied universities locally or abroad began to question the traditional sex roles and sexual division of labor. They were weary of the fact that the student movements and community movements they had involved never addressed gender issues. In order to arouse awareness of the public and to promote women's consciousness at the grassroots level, the Association for the Advancement of Feminism (AAF) was established in 1984. It was the first women's organization that addressed feminism as organizational orientation toward the gender problem and with a view of stressing the necessity to unravel the full, complicated dynamics of capitalist patriarchy as a precondition for bringing genuine emancipation for women. (Tsang, 1995)

Concern on grassroots women, such as female workers with a feminist understanding of their problems emerged. AAF launched grassroots awareness raising programs in the community challenging the traditional sex stereotype of women's role in the family and society, they also mobilized campaign against pornographic literature which distorted the women's image as sex objects. New women's organizations with a feminist orientation gradually established during this period, the Hong Kong Women's Christian
Council in 1988 and the Hong Kong Women Workers’ Association in 1989. Although with different in emphasis on target groups and work focus, the aim is to mobilize public concern to the oppression of women, to voice out the needs of women and to mobilize grassroots women’s participation to fight for their rights and campaigned for structural change.

The effort of grassroots mobilization and the consciousness raising work of social workers and community workers together with the opening up of organizing strategy of the community projects and community centres, paved way to the development of the third stage of the women’s movement. Many grassroots women’s groups with members who were female workers but under the category of housewives, single parents, women laborers who were attached and organized by community projects or community centres flourished in the 90s. To name a few, the women’s group of Chan Hing Community Service Centre, the Single parents’ group of the Yang Oi Tong Community Service Centre, Kwan Fook Women’s Concern Group (Abused women’s group), Eastern District Women Association, etc. This also raised the concern of trade unions to start concern female workers as a special category to organize and to arouse public attention to their situation as working class women laborers. Women’s committee was set up within the trade unions, such as in the Confederation of Trade Unions.

With the political climate of de-colonization and democratization of the political system, the concerned issues of the female workers such as age discrimination, childcare provisions, equal opportunities on family responsibility, social security for single parents, housing need and legal protection of abused women were being raised and put
into the political agenda for debate in the Legislative Council during that time. Actions from the female workers and campaigns were mobilized with great enthusiasm. Yet approaching 1997 political transition, and with the tightening of seats of direct election in the Legislative Council after the transition, the voice from the grassroots was being undermined and community projects were also confronted by pressure from the administrative level to reduce their active involvement in the women’s campaigns.

The women’s movement did not subside from such circumstances, in fact, a numerous groups developed in concern of women’s sexuality and sex identity marked the fourth stage of the movement. Amongst the women activists and the young educated universities students, the discussion on gender issues and the feminist discourse on sexuality became prominent. As the mainstream mobilization of grassroots concern decreased with the change in political situation, the women activists turned to the concern of one’s sexuality and those in the marginal sector in the gender arena. Organization which concern sex workers’ rights, Zi Teng, was established to raise the concern of the public and amongst the feminists circle, the autonomy of women’s choice in using their bodies and the recognition of sex workers as a job and the work protection that they are entitled to. There was also the setting up of a lesbian group, the Queer Sisters, which worked to challenge the patriarchal definition of women’s sexuality and the defend for the rights of lesbians. The Association Concerning Sexual Violence Against Women and several women’s organizations taking a more radical stance in defending women’s rights against sexual violence were emerged in late 90s.

This is a stage of pluralism, which grows from the development of the women’s movement from foreign committed women to localized feminists and then to
community and grassroots participation and presently to the concern on the controversial women's sexuality and sex identity issues. There is no doubt that the movement had made changes to the situation of women, the awareness of the gender problem and the societal concern to the disadvantage situation of women. More, is the actual organized effort in terms of services and organizational support to the struggle and to the enhancement of the women’s rights and their well being. At least, women’s needs and their disadvantaged situation is well recognized as a social issue of concern at the political to the grassroots level. The women’s movement is of unity and of diversity, during the course of the movement, what can be traced to identify the significance of the movement? What are the local characteristics of the movement? What has been achieved or what was hindering to the empowering of grassroots female workers? Are women being empowered through the women’s movement? The following discussion is to analyze the local characteristics of the movement and its impact on the empowerment strategies of women.

The Characteristics of the Women’s Movement and its impact on female workers’ empowerment

The Political Climate

The development of the women's movement is much influenced by the political climate and the cultural situation within the Hong Kong context. In the 50s, under the colonial rule and the refugee mentality of the first generation with the majority who came from mainland China after World War II and the Liberation of China under the Communist Party, the general population was inert to collective activities for the pursuit of
individual rights and political concern. Initiatives to defend the rights of women came from the expatriates and the professionals who were the privileged and resourceful sector in the colony. Until the 70s when the local born young generation and inspired by the radical wave during that time triggered the student movement and community movement. It paved way for the growth of local feminist initiatives and the setting up of local women's organizations with feminist perspectives.

The heightening of civil rights awareness and social concern to participate in influencing social policies came from the impact after signing the British-Sino Joint Declaration in 1984. It was the time when the population aware of the need to voice out to defend their rights before the 1997 deadline. Also under British political strategy of de-colonization, the political system was more opened up to public participation through direct election. Community based women's groups and organizations flourished to concern and to fight for their rights relating to practical issues which affected their livelihood. It was the time with the greatest grassroots female workers involvement in the movement and the most active period when the women's voice was heard in the formal political structure. After the transition, under the SAR government, apart from the tightening up of the citizens' participation in the formal political structure, women's issues were being marginalized and diversified. The power struggle was centered around the sovereignty and the SAR's autonomy, the issues related to the implementation of the principle of "one country, two systems". There also emerged a number of influential women's organizations such as the Hong Kong Federation of Women, formed by women with business and professional background as leaders and with community based network. These organizations are politically pro-China and performed as the mainstream voice of women. From their response in many
controversial social issues, they often took side to support the status quo.

Neutralization of Feminist Orientation

Owing to the specific political circumstances in which the women’s movement developed, there was basically lack of a tradition and an organized basis of social resistance in Hong Kong similar to those of the labor movement in Britain and the civil rights movement in the United States. The movement did not generate from a strong ideological basis thus the work to mobilize and to empower women are very much diverse and centered around practical issues.

Women’s organizations do not insist on a clear theoretical orientation. Most of the work they carried out did not specify what theoretical beliefs they hold, and it is not unusual that the members do not have a commonly agreed orientation. This phenomenon is further illustrated by the fact that most women’s organizations, especially those community based women organizations working with grassroots female workers, claimed to take a “women-oriented” approach, a politically neutral term or vague definition meaning “to put women’s development and their individual well being as their priority concern.” This terminology is especially prominently used by community based women’s groups and projects working with female workers.

Organizers and those who participated in the activities and actions would not identified themselves as feminists, for the term feminists usually is being associated with the Western feminists image of bra burning in the 70s as “extremists” and “radical”. Due to the Chinese cultural influence, the ideal relationship between the two sexes is
supposed to be harmonious and any confrontational perspective would not be seen as inappropriate. Therefore even the meaning of “women-oriented” work is defined in a relatively neutral and apolitical understanding to ease the confrontative image.

Theoretical Gap

As for the feminists’ organizations, there is also an unclear theoretic stance towards feminism and debate on theoretical orientation is basically lacking. There existed a gap between the feminist academics and the frontline women organizations, in fact, there are very few academics who hold a feminist perspective and even for those with such a vision, there seems to be lack of space or opportunity for them to influence the frontline strategy and to find a role to perform within the grassroots mobilization. This is owing to the pragmatic orientation and issue based approach on the mobilization of women on gender issues.

Pragmatic Orientation

The diverse and pragmatic orientation of the movement resulted in the absence of a united platform among women’s groups which obstructed the advances of the movement. Women’s coalitions are issue-based, often in response to unfair government policies and the immediate problems. But when the issues died down, the coalitions would subsided. Awareness raising on feminist perspectives is put to the least priority and often being undermined for basically there is the lack of theoretical conception towards the gender problem. As Ho commented, “What is needed is a structural outlook, a feminist principle to unite the hitherto ad hoc coalition of women’s forces.
Impact on Grassroots Female Workers’ Empowerment

Under this context with the lack of theoretical orientation and with the neutralization of the concept of feminism, grassroots mobilization of female workers is very much issue based and fragmented without politicizing the problems to a broader perspective to address political rights and to fight against the patriarchy system. The empowerment work with the grassroots female workers is mainly focused on individual development and the defence of equal opportunities. There exists the lack of bringing the awareness to the understanding of gender issues and further raising the issues to a feminist theoretical understanding resulted in inadequate political awareness and the difficulty to mobilize grassroots to concern and to act on broader issues other than their own immediate problems. The women’s movement failed to mobilize mass campaign amongst the grassroots female workers and at the same time is detached from the other social movement.

The specific character of the movement has an immense impact on the empowerment of women and the strategies adopted. The word “empowerment” has been widely used in the last decade amongst women’s organizations and community based women’s groups. Under the local context without a tradition of theoretical perspectives on feminism and politicizing the gender issue, the meaning of “empowerment” is greatly diverse and being used as a terminology under different political understanding with different impact to the women’s movement. The empowerment strategies for mobilizing grassroots women to gain power is therefore necessary to be studied and analyzed for
the advancement of the women's movement and for further understanding of the future
directions and approaches to women's empowerment. This leads to the objectives of
this study that is to address the issues relating to the empowerment work with female
workers and to understand the impact to female workers.
IV. Research Objectives

Chapter III highlighted the specific characteristics and problems within the women’s movement in Hong Kong. Grassroots organizing and strategies to empower women vary according to the different political orientation and background of the organizations. The word ‘empowerment’ although often being used by organizers as an objective of programs and activities, the concept and the meaning of the term has not been clearly defined. In fact, as pointed out in last chapter, a lot of organizers termed their empowerment work as ‘women-oriented’ approach, which is a vague and politically undefined word, it can mean anything ranging from feminist perspective to traditional views in enhancing women to further conform to their gender roles. One can only trace their meanings from the background of the organizations, their perception of the women’s problem and from their work strategies/programs organized for the women. It is under this context that this study is aimed to examine the conception of empowerment of the organizations working with female workers, using different strategies and to understand the impact towards the female workers during the empowering process. In this chapter, the author is to defined the target groups to be studied, the criteria for the selection of interviewing targets and outline the objectives of the study.

For female workers, it is defined in this study as women working as paid and unpaid labor. This includes women laborers, homemakers, sex workers, unemployed women workers, and welfare recipients who due to their single parenthood, are forced to remain in long term unemployment. This definition is rather broad but it signifies the
condition of women regarding their status as workers. As most of the time, grassroots women due to gender inequality and class oppression, are often placed in a marginal situation especially in relation to economic activities. Their opportunities for paid work are much restricted by their family responsibility, educational background, and marital status. In fact, a lot of female workers are forced to be thrown out of paid work due to these restrictions, such as single parents who cannot afford to sustain their living with the low paid jobs available in the labor market. They will then have to depend on welfare assistance to sustain their living. Another reason for taking unemployed women as female workers is because if they are thrown out of the paid work force, their status as workers will be dismissed and being regarded as homemakers or housewives, meaning they have no economic status. This resulted in making female workers’ employment needs invisible. This study is aiming to address the empowerment work with female workers, thus, the different conditions that put female workers in a powerless situation is needed to be addressed. Therefore, the organizations that work for their empowerment is not strictly defined as those related to labor issues but also those who work to empower them when female workers are being forced out of paid work.

In Hong Kong, organizations that work with female workers specifically identified their work as women’s work or services for women basically can be classified into three. Although there exists numerous labor organizations, all of them focus their work on labor issues and would not organized female workers as their main targets. The three categories of organizations that work with female workers are, firstly women’s organizations which mostly are non-subvented by the government. They are mostly with a feminist or 'women' orientation in responding to female workers issues, some
supported by working as policy critics and advocate, others work on direct organizing and providing services for grassroots female workers. The Hong Kong Women Workers’ Association is one of these organizations which was being interviewed in this study. The second category are those which receive government subvention, they are mostly women project/team under a social welfare or community-based organization. The activities and services provided to female workers are mostly delivered by trained social workers. This is due to the requirement from the government to the subvented agencies as the programs are seen as welfare service provisions. The Women’s Team of Yang Oi Tong is being interviewed under this category in this study. The third category of organizations to work with female workers are trade unions. They usually formed a women’s committee to address female workers issues and defend female workers’ rights through working on labor disputes cases, social actions and by advocacy. The Women’s Committee of the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions was being interviewed under this category in this study.

These female workers organizing agents have different political orientations, conceptions of power and empowerment, thus adopted different strategies to work with grassroots women and therefore may have different impact on the women. The aim of this research is therefore to study the different conceptions of empowerment of the female workers’ organizing agents and their impact on women’s empowerment. The main organizer of three different organizations (a women’s organization, a welfare organization and a trade union) were being interviewed and three women who have involved in the empowering activities/programs from each organization also were interviewed to collect their opinions on the empowering process.
There are three specific aspects to be focused in data collection and analysis of the study. The three aspects already have been highlighted in Chapter II under the framework of analysis. Firstly, the conception of empowerment by the organizing agents. Secondly, the perception of the empowering process of the female workers who participated in the programs/activities. Thirdly, the power relations between the empowerer and the empowered, that is between the organizer and the female workers. Under the above framework, the objectives of the research therefore, are:

1. To examine the organizers’, namely a trade union, a welfare organization, and a women’s organization, their conception towards empowerment and the strategies used.

2. To examine the perception of the women participants towards their empowering experiences, in relation to their self perception and awareness raising on politics and gender.

3. To examine the power relations between the organizers and the women participants within the empowering process and the impact on both parties.

4. To explore the relation between the conception of empowerment, the use of empowerment strategies and the impact to female workers’ empowerment.
V. Research Methodology

"Feminism is a mode of analysis, a method of approaching life and politics, a way of asking questions and searching for answers." (Nes & Iadicola, 1989) This research will adopt feminist methodology as basis for guiding the process of data collection and research analysis. In fact, there exists vivid discussion and argument toward the specificity of a feminist methodology, challenging that feminism implies a distinctive approach to inquiry. (Martyn Hammersley, 1992) In this chapter, I will first illustrate some of the basic principles of the feminist methodology especially as guidelines for conducting this study. Secondly, some controversial issues will be discussed related to the queries of viewing feminist methodology a specific, distinctive research method. Thirdly the method of research of this study will be outlined.

5.1 Feminist Methodology and Criticism

There are many types of feminisms, just as there are multiple approaches to other theories. Feminist researchers hold a number of positions in common, although not speaking with one voice. The research tools that are used will vary across feminist researchers but despite the differences, Worell (1996) surveyed relevant literatures and identifies core principles - the six guiding themes of feminist research which illustrate the commonalities and convergence of feminist researches and revealing the significance of the specific unique character of the methodology. In fact, adopting a feminist principle in research does not imply abandoning the commitment to the
established methods, but to uncover the institutionalized hidden agendas that are embedded in conventional research and to transform them into concrete and legitimate knowledge. These guiding principles are as followed:

1. Challenges traditional scientific inquiry - as a objection to the notion of "science is value free", feminist research makes values explicit, and at the same time, identifies and monitors bias in research procedure. Feminists are against the traditional research principles which postulate of neutrality and indifference toward research objects. On contrary, they consider the process as conscientization in nature, and a chance for researchers and participants to revisit their everyday lives, to articulate the feelings as a subordinated gender, and to uncover the process of social construction of gender subordination. (Mies, 1983)

2. Focuses on the experiences and lives of women - it challenges the category of "women" by exploring diversity and looks at focal issues in women's lives. The methodology emphasize on the validity of personal experience, addressing women's lives and experiences in their own terms. As "Feminism insisted that personal experiences could not be invalidated or rejected because if something was felt then it was, absolutely real for the woman feeling and experiencing it. (Stanley and Wise, 1979) The researches also aim to affirms women's strengths, resilience, and competence.

3. Considers asymmetrical power arrangement - research intend to view subordinate status via power instead of deficiency, and seeing differences among women as mediated by power and seeks for empowerment of women. The researcher and the participants relationship should be a reciprocal one, and the rejection of hierarchy in the research relationship. "Genuineness and equal participation" from both parties is
essential.

4. Recognizes gender as an essential category of analysis - researches use multiple conceptions of gender and consider gender/gendering as socially constructed.

5. Attends to language and the power 'to name' - asserting that language frames thought and restructures language to be unbiased and inclusive.

6. Promotes social activism and societal change - the research aims also to challenge entitlement based on status and its goals toward social and gender justice. Viewing feminist research as a necessary process of conscientization for both researcher and the researched, for as Harding(1987) stated, "those who do not struggle against the exploitation of women in everyday life are unlikely to produce social science research about any subject at all that is undistorted by sexism and androcentrism."

Criticisms toward the distinctiveness of feminist methodology by Martyn Hammersley had raised a great deal of debate over feminist methodology. Firstly the criticism lies in that the gender awareness in research methodology is not unique in feminist research, it can be of focus to all other research and that taking it as a privilege significance, may strip away other aspects of the context of the phenomena studied. It should not be, although important, given any pre-established priority over other variables. Second, the criticism argue the appeals on direct experience are not distinctive to feminist methodology but to all qualitative methodology. One should emphasize neither method nor experience, but rather seek to correct experience by use of method, and method by the use of experience. Third is the researcher and participant relationship, that no matter how to reduce such hierarchical relationship, yet the fundamental difference in power and knowledge exist, because deciding what and how data are to be collected, to analysis and to write the research report has been predetermined by the researcher. And
at the same time, the participants have full rights to decide whether to be interviewed, the settings and the information released. The relationship is already embedded with intellectual authority and its authority is limited by also the autonomy of the participants. This power relationship should be addressed to, instead of rejection to all inequalities of power. Finally, the goal of emancipation of feminist research are being challenge on the basis that truth and effectiveness may not be related or have no necessary connection. The process of inquiry will be shaped by the constraints and requirement of the practice. Due to the goal to be achieved, may restrict topics of inquiry and limit the degree to which assumptions are tested.

However, detailed discussion and clarification for further substantiation on feminist methodology is required, yet, it provides an identity and a clear position for the researcher to be aware of during the process of conducting the study. Furthermore, it is not the matter so much as a distinct methodology as such, but it significance lies in its distinctive political orientation toward the application of research results to practice and to the change for greater social and gender justice. Feminist methodology is a political stance, and its existence is already an integrated meaning in itself and a difference to the conventional research methodology.

5.2 Research Method of this Study

In the light of feminist methodology, the study focuses on the experience of grassroots women in relation to their empowerment through their involvement in the programs and in actions. The focus is not simply on the description of the experience, but also how they perceive and construct meaning from their experiences. Feminist
methodology recognizes the diverse experience of women. This research is also focused on the conception of empowerment of the women organizers, their attitudes and approaches to women’s empowerment. Qualitative research methods which help to explore the experiences of female workers and the organizers is adopted. The reasons for using qualitative method rather than quantitative research is because feelings and thoughts towards the subject’s experience is hardly to be quantifiable, and if doing so, may restrict our understanding of their experiences by those quantified variables rather than learning their experiences as an integrated whole. As qualitative research assumes that the social world is always a human creation not a discovery (Smith, 1992): consequently interpretative science tries to capture reality as it is, namely as seen and experienced by the respondents. The research method echoes feminist methodology’s principle in which it tries to capture reality in interaction and provide a deeper understanding of social phenomena. This method helps to interpret meaningful human actions and interpretations that people give of themselves or others. It aims to understand people and not to measure them but to produce descriptive data, presenting in the respondents’ own words their views and experiences. (Smith, 1992) As this study is focused to study the experiences of female workers during the empowering process, and the conception of empowerment of the organizers as well as the power relations within the process, therefore qualitative research method is adopted in this study.

In-depth interviews were conducted to collect data from the participants. The perceptions and feelings toward empowerment of the key organizer, from a trade union, a government subvented welfare organization and a women’s organization were identified. The reasons for selecting the above three types was explained in the last
Chapter. The existed organizational literature was reviewed as well as in-depth interviews were conducted. Their use of strategies and their assessment of the strategies toward the empowering of women workers were explored during the interviews.

Case materials such as slogans, documentary materials or even demands on women’s issues of the three organizations were used only as reference in this research. They were not being studied as data to be analyzed in this research because the main focus of the research is on the process of empowerment which relates directly to the subjective experiences of the organizers and the women who were targets of the empowerment programs.

Three women participants from each organization were being interviewed, a total of nine and the key woman organizer of the empowerment program from each of the three organizations was interviewed during the period from October, 1998 to February, 1999. As the researcher was involved as an organizer of one of the organizations but not the key organizer, taking into consideration of building of trust and the sensitivity of the subject discussed, special emphasis on the principle of confidentiality and explanation of the research objectives was mentioned in the interviews. This is especially important to lower the level of mistrust and misunderstanding of the organizer and the female workers toward the researcher when conducting the interviews.

The design of the interview guidelines is semi-structured, but questions that would be asked were discussed with the participants before interviewing, modification and adding of new questions relevant to the study were considered after reaching mutual
agreement with the participants. The reports of the interviews had been sent to the participants for comment to minimize appropriation of the study.

Certain limitations of the study had been considered. Firstly, is the interpretation of empowerment, in Chinese language. As the term is translated from English, and a rather professional jargon, women from the grassroots may not literally understand the meaning of the term. Often the term is interpreted in Cantonese, as “to gain power” (充權) or “self strengthening” (自強), which in fact, has its own meaning behind. Therefore during the process of data collection, the term to be defined has been very specifically interpreted and elaborated in common language understandable to the researched targets. Both Chinese terms of the word ‘empowerment’ was mentioned and leaving to the women’s own interpretation which they identified most. Secondly, is the sensitivity of the subject of study, for it may be seen as an assessment of the work of the different organizations to female workers. The politics behind the different groups has been considered. The researcher was able to convince the organizations to be studied to identify with the aim of the research and to encourage their assistance to the study. In fact, there was one welfare organization refused to be interviewed due to the above reason. Measures for confidentiality and building of trust has been considered as paramount in conducting this research, in order that the data collected could be comprehensive and genuine. Last but not the least, is the post-mortem effect, that the process was already over and their feelings and thoughts towards the change may be distorted or reinterpreted in the course of other involvement or by other factors. Therefore, during the interviews, the researcher had emphasized to the interviewees that their ideas and feelings had to be the present viewpoints and that it had to be their subjective experiences without any evaluative meaning of positive or negative, but
genuine.

Actually during the course of interviews, there were a lot of reflections to the work and expression of feelings from the women as well as the organizers. This is also a special element of feminist methodology that the research itself is an awareness raising process. Several women when sharing their feelings towards their powerless situation as women workers and as single parents, there was tears from their eyes. The tears were their expression to their genuine feelings of sadness to their hardship and anger towards the humiliation they faced under the oppression. The researcher responded by empathizing with their feelings and by giving support to them recognizing their strength and courage. Thus the interviews were not a hierarchical relationship between the interviewer and the interviewees, it was a process of interaction with concern to others feelings and support.
VI. The Trade Union Strategy

Presentation of the Findings

The meaning of empowerment lies in the conception of "power" and the understanding of the "power relations" according to one's political perspective. This study aims to examine the process of change of female workers experiencing from a powerless situation to a relative powerful, self assertive state through the involvement in the empowerment programs from different organizations, a women's organization, a trade union and a NGO organization which acted as the empowerer. The key issues concerned in this study related to the empowerment discourse are their empowerment experiences and their power relations with the authorities and the empowerers. According to the framework of analysis of the study, special focus will be concentrated in the following three aspects:

1. Conception of empowerment by the organizing agents.

2. The Empowering Process and Experience of Female Workers (the external relation)

3. The Power Relation between the Organizer and the Female workers (the internal relation)

These three aspects will be based as focus for analysis and discussion of the findings in this chapter and the next two chapters.

In order to give a comprehensive presentation of the data collected from the interviews, this Chapter and the following two chapters are presenting the data collected from the three organizations, that is, the Confederation of trade unions, the Hong Kong Women Workers' Association and the Yang Oi Tong Community Service Centre. In each
chapter, the data will be presented in two parts. Part I is based on the organizational materials and the data collected from the interview with the organizer. It includes:

Organizers’ Conception of Empowerment

i. the background information of the organization and their work strategies

ii. the conception of empowerment by the organizer

iii. the difference in conception of empowerment between the organization and the organizer

iv. the obstacles encountered in the empowering process

Organizers’ Power Relation with the Female workers

v. the organizer’s perception on the impact of empowerment on the women

vi. the relationship between the empowerer and the empowered as perceived by the organizer.

In Part II, the findings are based on the data collected in the interviews with the women participants from each organization. It includes:

Female Workers’ Empowering Experience (both external and internal power relations)

i. the background of the interviews

ii. the women involvement in the programs (the history of involvement and their participation)

iii. their experience of empowerment (female workers expressed their views and working relationships with the organizers)

iv. obstacles to their empowerment (female workers from the women’s organization mentioned the organizational problem which hindered their participation)
v. their awareness on gender equality.

The findings from the three group of interviews is analyzed separately in order to give a overall understanding of each different strategy under the different perception on empowerment and the impact on the women. The three strategies and the women responses to their empowering experience is further compared and contrast in the following chapter.

The Trade Union Strategy

Part I

The trade union that was selected to be studied is the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (CTU). To select CTU for the reason that it is a relatively young trade union, with a women's committee established within the organization and often having a high profile to react on female workers issues. Because of its high exposure to the media relating to women workers' issues, and having a significant impact in the struggle for women workers' rights, it is worth studying their perception towards women workers' empowerment and their empowerment strategies in terms of strengthening women's power.

i) Background of CTU’s Women’s Committee

The Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions was established in the 70s. In the late 80s, it started to set up a Women's Committee responding issues relating to female
workers' rights. According to the organizer and who was also the secretary of the Women's Committee since 1993, Cheung Lai Ha said that the Committee was set up at the same time as the Workers' Affairs Committee. But at that time, it existed by name only, responded to individual issue, only one or two members responsible to react to those issues.

She commented that the Committee actually existed as a nutshell. CTU had no intention to do much in the committee, meaning that to do some substantial work such as organizing and consolidating female workers, but just for the sake of responding to current issues. She felt that here was not at all any progress, and the development was extremely stagnant.

It was until Cheung became a full-time organizer under the Garment Workers' General Union, she became much involved in the Women's Committee and acted as the spokesperson as well as the secretary of the Committee. She started to re-organize the Committee since 1993, inviting female executive committee members and female members of the affiliated trade unions to join in the Women's Committee and holding regular meetings to discuss issues relating to female workers.

The reason for Cheung to re-organize the Women's Committee was,

"In the trade union, a Workers' Affairs Committee have been set up to concern workers issues, even without the Committee, workers issues are always the priority of concern within the trade union. The majority of the executive committee is male members,"
and very few female members involved. At that time, only one or two out of the 18 executive committee members, now 3 to 4 female members out of the total of 24. It is difficult for the executive committee to initiate concern on women workers' issue, but they will pick up workers' issue definitely. If you want to put women workers concern into the agenda, you have to take the initiative yourself. Half of the work force is women, there is no reason not to do more on women's work."

The Women's Committee after re-organizing had 6 to 7 members who were more actively involved. But since last year, Cheung resigned from the secretary of the Women's Committee, the role of co-ordination and mobilization was left vacant. The Committee became loosely organized. Most of the response relating to women workers' issues still rest on the shoulder of Cheung, but she is speaking mostly on behalf of the Garment, Clerical and Retail Workers' General Union, and even if she continues to represent the Women's Committee to speak in the public, the actual functioning of the Committee is extremely low.

ii) The Disparity Between the Trade Union's Position and the Organizer's Position Towards Women's Work and Women Workers' Empowerment

During the interview, the organizer Cheung had expressed her frustration towards the work in the Women's Committee. She had a feeling that she was struggling to keep the Committee alive on her own and the work was extremely heavy without much support. She commented,
“I feel that if you want to do women's work, you should not just put everything on a person's shoulder. If an organization really want to do something, there should be more commitment. You should think of putting more resources into the development of the work. I have mentioned this before, if you do not plan for the development and just push everything onto one person's responsibility, that person can do a lot, but till the end it is still only one person, and that is not good. They have promised to do more in the future, but I will wait and see what will happen in the coming two years.”

Obviously, the organizer had her expectation toward the trade union's commitment toward the future development of women work, her expectations as she said,

“How to actually implemented the work is to put more resources, money, manpower into it. The overall atmosphere within the organization, and this includes amongst the staff, their concern towards women's issues, and need more active concern. Even the female staff are not concern about women issues, not to mention the staff of the other sex.”

CTU did not put women work as their priority and yet will still remain a low input and a high output strategy to sustain an image of concerning women workers rights. As Cheung said,
"The main kind of work we do is to deal with labor disputes cases, and to organize action to fight for workers rights. Action is the main strategy."

"In fact, a lot of the media will approach us to comment on female workers issues, especially those related to women employment. Actually, CTU has already established a certain image on that aspect. Of course I hope it can develop better, and not just running on the same spot, just like now we are slowing down. I don't know whether it is my responsibility, but I feel that it is not my problem and that it is something everyone should work together."

In fact within the trade union culture, there is little space for women workers especially grassroots, to develop and to be empowered. It is embedded with male chauvinistic culture in which women will feel intimidated when they participate in the activities. Cheung had the experience of this and she strongly felt the difficulties for grassroots women to find their space to develop within such circumstances. She cited some of her previous encounters,

"There is something which I really hated when going to overseas conferences. All those union conferences are with those big brothers, not to say grassroots women, even when I attended those conference, the majority are men, most from
high level and high position within the trade unions. I can’t see any women from high position, only occasionally. I think if grassroots women go to those conference will be scared to death.”

“All they talk about in those conferences are high sounding, broad basis, and vague without much substantial ground (高大空). When women go to meetings, some men will comment, ‘those women are not doing anything when going to meetings, they only stay for a while and leave.’ The men don’t understand that women still have to worry about their families, their homes. After meetings, the men will go out for drink, how could the women get involved into their circle! Did they ever consider the condition of women. They keep on talking and talking, women especially those who are new to these exposure, how could they participate!”

The opportunity for female workers to develop and find their space to be empowered within the trade union is very limited. As from the experience of Cheung as the organizer, there is not enough resources within local trade union to develop women’s work, which in fact, is not the priority of work in the trade union. To maintain a certain degree of concern on women issues, she has to bear the sole responsibility over the work and to keep the functioning of the Women’s Committee. The overall trade union line is predominantly male culture and this has been illustrated in her encounters in the
outside exposure and there is little space for women, especially grassroots women workers to develop, even worse, it could be intimidating rather than enhancing their self confidence. Yet, even facing with such difficulties, Cheung as the organizer, had tried various attempts to empower female workers within the trade union.

iii) Conception on Empowerment and Strategy

Even though within the trade union, there were little resources to develop women's work, Cheung still persisted to carry out programs to empower women workers when she was the secretary of the Women's Committee. Her perception towards women's empowerment emphasized much on individual enhancement and personal growth especially on one's self confidence. As she said,

"During their involvement in the work, the women often feel that they could do nothing at all. They would say, 'I'm afraid, I do not know how to read and write, etc.' They would bring out all sorts of reasons to confirm that they are unable to do the things. I think, first of all you have to let them know you do not need to be highly educated to do those things. Everyone has her own strength, if you find out what is your strengthen, and develop from there, and for your own weaknesses, you can spend some time to overcome. Not everyone has to be the best. The most important is to explore your strength and to develop it."

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"Another thing is that apart from family, husband and children, women still have a lot to do, only that you have to step, just one step forward, to have a breakthrough, otherwise you would never walk ahead."

Her perception towards the workers movement and the women’s movement is more inclined to a socialist feminist perspective. She expressed that,

"Workers’ movement has to link up with women’s movement, I, as part of the trade union, will try to integrate women’s issues into the workers’ movement and is not separating the two and to make the men also concern and treating these work more seriously."

In fact, the strategy that she adopted was to further enhance the female workers self-confidence through social action, which is obviously the main strategy of the trade union. She would encourage the female workers to speak out and to try to be the spokesperson, and help them to prepare for the action. She often encouraged them to build up their confidence by giving compliments to them and also through discussion develop their awareness on workers’ issues. More, she also spent extra effort to organize sharing sessions, named as Learning Circle, which emphasized on skills learning and knowledge building. The target participants were members from the Women’s Committee and female members from the affiliated trade unions. There were two part in the Learning Circle Program. The first part consisted of skills such as public speaking, self assertiveness, and related skills, the second part emphasized legal
knowledge, especially those related to women and awareness training.

The program was carried out with great difficulties although she had put a lot of time, effort and energy into it. The outcome was rather disappointing to her, apart from the low turn out rate, she was also working in isolation without much support from the organization. Apart from those limitations of female workers due to their dual oppression as women and as workers, obstacles that she came across were, internalized within the trade union and the incompatibility to the trade union line. What were the obstacles and the difficulties that she faced when carrying out the empowerment programs for female workers?

iv) The Difficulties and Obstacles to Implement the Empowering Programs Within the Trade Union

According to Cheung, there was great disparity between what she planned and what had been carried out in the Learning Circle. There were problems in the mobilization, and one of the reason was due to the women's lack of awareness and not responding enthusiastically to the programs. The second problem was the lack of resources, as she was the only one to plan, to implement and to do follow-up work, she found it extremely demanding on her and very often, she failed to work intensively with individual member and to follow through the process. The third problem was basically embedded in the structure of the organization, that the male leaders of the affiliated trade unions were not co-operative to send their female members to participate the Learning Circle. As Cheung said,
"every time I see those men in the trade unions, I would ask them to 'pass' the women to me, to send them out, so that I can reach them. But I can't even get in touch with them, how can I do anything, it's so difficult." "At the beginning, I thought maybe I can go to each trade union to explain the work of the Women Committee so that they can have a better idea, but there are more than 40 affiliated trade unions, even if I go to one every month, it takes years to do so. But due to the lack of time and staff, it is very hard for me to do it alone."

The fourth obstacles is related to the trade union's line which emphasized an action oriented strategy and neglected the personal relationship building and emotional support. As Cheung felt that empowerment work of female workers required a great deal of intensive support and relationship building. She said,

"I think the trade union neglects the kind of work to build up relationship with the women, and these sort of work takes time, actually the union did very little on the emotional enhancement and personal development work, something more humane. Most of the time, they are talking and working on actions, issues one after another. Even when I feel that some members have personal problems and when needed emotional support, we fail to do much to help."

An example was she had thought of organizing an English class for the less educated
female workers. The aim was to give them time to learn slowly and to help them regain their self confidence, but her idea was being criticized as 'not practical enough', 'no use' and 'no one support to help the teaching' so in the end, she failed to carry out the program.

As the union strategy emphasized action, very often even some female workers started to join in but when the action was over, there was nothing to consolidate them and they will gradually lost contact with the organization, and there is no continuity to further develop the female workers. As Cheung commented,

"the union is very mechanical, very militant, but without feelings, and inhumane."

She also faced criticism within the union by male workers who challenged her saying,

"you always talk about women's problems, you are afraid of the lack of attention, even others do not discriminate you, you are discriminating yourself as a weaker sex that needed more care and attention."

This shows that within the union, gender sensitivity is rather low amongst the staff and the leaders of the unions, and she has great difficulty to break the dominant thinking and to carry out the empowering programs for female workers.

Another obstacle she came across was the segregation of women's work. As most of the time whenever there were issues related to women, the organization will
automatically rest the responsibility onto the Women's Committee, but will never integrate the work with the Workers' Committee and the two committee will seldom co-operate to work together on women's issues because they felt that this is what women have to do. For example, in response to the issue of age discrimination, it was mainly the effort of the Women's Committee to concern the issue, instead of joining forces with the Workers' Committee to fight for legislation to prohibit age discrimination. Cheung was quite frustrated to see the segregation of the Women's Committee, in fact, she felt that women's issues can also be workers' issues and that the union should treat the issues as one of the main concern of the organization and not just the Women's Committee concern.

v) Organizer's perception on the impact of empowerment on female workers

Cheung said that she could see some female workers had obviously changed after their involvement in the actions and activities in the union. She said even herself had some growth in terms of the awareness to women issues. In the Garment Workers' General Union, the women had some obvious change, for example, they were afraid to speak out at the beginning, and now they became more confident to express themselves and some even to speak in the public or being interviewed by the media. She said,

"only if they can have one step forward, they can do much more."

She hopes to further develop them by teaching them more skills. However, in terms of awareness raising, especially on gender awareness, she said it is rather difficult, and she
did not do much on this aspect. She has to find appropriate occasions to discuss with them for even the women themselves may find it hard to accept, some even if they are aware of gender inequality, they do not know what they can do.

"You cannot approach this aspect too far, the women will not accept it. You have to do it in a subtle way, slowly through informal sharing."

From Cheung’s attitude showed, gender awareness building had not been developed as a priority in her empowering work. She would put women workers rights and social actions as the priority instead of integrating the female workers' experiences in their families and other living aspects to raise their concern and gender awareness. This is because within the trade union culture, women issues are still secondary to that of workers issues.

vi) The Empowerer and the Empowered

The organizer who acts as the empowerer sees herself as the role model for the women workers who are to be empowered. As Cheung said, the women workers often took her as a model to compare their performance and capability. As she came from a similar background as the women workers, such as primary education level with factory working experience, she often encouraged them by reinstating herself as an example that women workers need not feel unconfident due to their low education level, just like herself, she can do a lot and it is the working experiences that enrich your knowledge and capability. So even a person with low education level can still develop
into a leader as like herself. As she said in the interview,

"I also hope that they see me as leader, so that someone with a similar background as them, if they feel that I can do so many things, so do they. Only if you got the guts, you can do it gradually. I think this is a way to encourage them."

Obviously, the organizer in this case acts as a successful example to the women workers and they develop under her leadership, also she acts as a role model for the women workers to follow. This clearly demonstrate the relationship between the empowerer and the empowered is one of a leader and follower relationship, the hierarchical relationship may give much pressure to the women workers who may not be able to attain the expected, modeled performance and it gives a great deal of control to the empowerer in the process as she acts as the leader to the women workers. The impact of such relationship can be further elaborated from the interviews with the women workers. It also illustrated in the participation of women workers in the empowerment activities, as Cheung told us in the interview,

"Sometimes they came to those empowerment sessions—the Learning Circle were due to the reason that they gave face to me, for they saw me working so hard for it, so they came. Which I think is problematic."

Situated in a hierarchical structure within the trade union, the relationship between the organizer and the women workers is also a lead and follow relationship. This kind of
relationship may hinder the development of the women workers as an individual and to her self confidence for she would always be under the shadow of a successful leadership model which she has to work to achieve. The empowerment process under such working relationship may be disempowering for those who failed to perform as the role model, and therefore may be defined / or self defined as inadequate or unsuccessful.

In fact this kind of pressure not only exist toward the women workers, but also gives much pressure to the organizer too. As Cheung said,

"they also see me as a superwoman, very tough and strong.
But in fact, I am just a woman as any other woman, I still have my family responsibility and limitations as a working woman.
But often, the other people ( colleagues and workers) will not understand and will be very demanding on me."

"I seldom share my history and my feelings with them, if they see me as a model, I am the same as they are, I also have my worries and frustrations, I am not a superwoman."

Part II
The Women Workers' from the Trade Union

i) The Background of the Interviews

The interviews were took place in CTU, the women workers were interviewed individually and each interview lasted for about one hour, because the women workers needed to attend a meeting after the interview, time was rather restricted. Three women were interviewed. Two of them, Ah Lin and Ah Ling are over the age of 50, both of them are the executive committee members of the Garment, Clerical and Retail General Workers' Union, which is one of the affiliated trade unions of CTU. Although they are not the members in the Women's Committee, but they were also invited to participate in the actions and activities organized by the Women's Committee, and occasionally, they also joined in the empowerment programs run by the organizer, Cheung. The third woman being interviewed was Ah Mei, she is age 43 and is still working in garment factory although a lot of the production work has moved to China and the work in Hong Kong is much reduced. She was not involved in the executive committee in the trade union but she is active in participating the demonstration and actions of the trade union. She has been with the Confederation of Trade Unions since 1991.

ii) Their Involvement in the Trade Union

Ah Lin, age 50, previously working in garment factory for fifteen years. She started as a homeworker for a garment factory after having children. Because the children were small, she had to stay at home to work. After the children entered into school, started to go to the factory and continued as garment worker. In 1992, the factory closed
down, and refused to pay them redundancy compensation. The workers then went to CTU for help, they were then organized to claim back their compensation. Ah Lin then joined the trade union and two years later she was asked to be the executive committee members of the Garment, Clerical and Retail General Workers' Union. After losing the job in the garment factory, Ah Lin went to the Labor Department to seek for job. The job seeking process was rather frustrated due to age discrimination. At that time she was only 44 and was being seen as too old for many jobs.

Finally, she was being introduced by the Labor Department to work as a cook for a trading company. The wage was rather low ($4,000) when she first started, but she needed a job to sustain the living of the family so she took up the job. The workload increased from cooking meals for 30 persons to 70 persons. She still continued to stay on to the job until present, that is already over 5 years.

The economic restructuring has a great impact on her, as she said,

"the industrial restructuring had a great impact on me, if there is still work to do in the factory, I would still continue to work, but a lot of the factories already moved away."

"At that time, I was very helpless, the children were still in school and my husband earned not enough to maintain the family, I had to work to sustain the living. When I was looking for jobs, the employers did not want to take us, they said I was too old, I did not know what to do, only had to keep on trying."
Ah Ling, age 49, working as wool garment worker for over 20 years. Even a lot of the factories have closed down and moved away, they have less and less work to do in the factory but she continue to stay on until recently, there was not any work at all, she then had to look for jobs in the service sector. But because of her appearance and age, (she is hunchbacked) it was very difficult for her to find a new job. Finally, she find a job in a bakery shop as a casual worker, doing cleaning and casual work at the back of the shop. The workload is very heavy and the work is very tough. After working for two months, she already had back pain and pain in the joints.

Her involvement in CTU was started in one of the protest against the removal of wool garment factories to the North. It was a street protest followed by a hunger strike, at first she refused to participate as she was invited by one of the workers in the factory but after much persuasion she decided to go. After joining the General Workers' Union, she said,

"not knowing much about the Union, I was then kicked into the executive committee as members, I only go to meetings, sometimes join in the actions, for things that are too difficult and needs a lot of input, I could not do much to help since with my low education background, I cannot help much."

Throughout the interview, she had been mentioning at least over 5 times, that she is incapable to help much in the trade union due to her low education level and the feeling of lack of confidence and low self identity was obvious.
The impact of the restructuring was extremely great to her, especially it is even more difficult for her to find jobs in the service sector due to her disable appearance, (her hunchback). She said,

"The restructuring had a great impact on me, we need to earn our living, losing our job meaning losing our ability to sustain the living. Now, the job is very hard for me, but I still have to do for I need to earn my living."

"Before the restructuring, I earned a lot in the factory, that was the glamorous time. I could earn a lot of money. But when the factories started to close down and less and less work to do, I felt that the employers are very cruel, we strive to work very hard for them but at the end what have we earned? I felt that the employers are using us, if they do not have us working so hard, they would not gained so much overseas quota and so much profits."

Her experience gave her much insights to see the exploitation of being a worker and gain much in raising her class consciousness as a worker.

The impact was destructive to her self image and confidence, she said,

"at the beginning of working as casual worker in the bakery
"shop, she felt like crying every day."

She thought that the skills that she learned in the garment factory can be an asset to her for the future living and that she could work till her old age, but suddenly, all the skills became worthless as the factories moved away.

"I felt very helpless and could not do much to change the situation. In the past, I was the supervisor, now I became an amah, thinking back all this, it was very hard to accept. Now I have to be supervised by those young girls, and they instructed me to do this and that, it is really hard to accept, I felt myself being very low, once I thought of that I would feel like crying. But now I still have to face up to this, getting used to this treatment, try to be insensitive to live with it."

It was an extremely powerless experience and during the interview, when she shared her frustration facing the restructuring of the economy, and the sense of losing her dignity and the helpless feeling, she almost cried.

As for Ah Mei, she is still working in the garment factory but the economic restructuring also affected her job opportunity. Most of the production in the factory has moved to China and she only have enough work to do for nine months in the year round, she is now became under-employed. As she said that such situation did affect her and her job opportunity,
"Not as good as before, at least now there is not enough work to do. In the past, if there was not enough work to do, we could change to another factory to find a better one. But now there is no such opportunity to change, because the present one I am working is relatively a big company, the small factories had also been closed already. The big company still allows us to work nine months throughout the year."

As this situation also affects her living and her financial situation, she said,

"I have less choice now, and financially also being affected. At least now I have to spend less, whereas before, I would spend money easily, bought things that I liked. Now if I spend the money, I do not know when I can earn it back."

She continued to say that,

"At least for the past three years, I cannot afford to travel to take a break, because I earn not enough money. Actually now the money that I earned is even less than that in 1989, 1990 but now the cost of living has inflated."

To Ah Mei, the financial pressure is not a great as the other two interviewees because she is single and she is living with her family. The other siblings also shared the responsibility to take care of the expenses of the family. Although Ah Mei does not
have a strong powerless feeling as the other two women being interviewed, she had a
great sense of feeling unjust to her as worker and she felt angry toward the employers.
She said,

"The boss are really bad, they lied with their eyes open. They
denied the things they said, such as they fired workers, being
harsh to them but publicly they denied all that. They told the
public they will not displace the workers, but in actual fact, they
did."

She joined the mass action organized by the trade unions in 1991 when she got the
publication leaflet from one of the workers in the factory. So she decided to join the
action to defend their rights when the factories started to move back to China. She said
she did not have much resistance going to the street for action because she had did that
before in the June 4th Incident. (The student movement in Beijing being cracked down
by the military in the end) After the joining in the demonstration of the trade union, she
became a member and continuously involved in our campaigns to fight for workers' rights.

iii) The Empowerment Experience

All of them, Ah Lin, Ah Ling and Ah Mei, felt that they have learned more and widened
their perspectives in seeing things and the problems in society. Yet, the response
towards their involvement in the actions and activities in the trade union was rather
different between Ah Lin and Ah Ling. Ah Lin is more positive, she sees herself more
verbal and gain much confidence in the process. She is now more competent to speak out and more confident to express her ideas and thinking in the meetings and even to the public. She had the experience of speaking her experience in a public protest and was being interviewed by the media.

As for Ah Ling, her response was rather negative and feeling still very incapable to do much especially within the trade union. She said that she was very frustrated to see people joining the actions and gradually leaving the organization. The protest to defend their rights were not successful and the strength that she still continue to help is because seeing the organizer and the trade unionists fighting so hard and yet without much reward, she felt she had to keep on supporting them and she had great admiration to their strength, so even though she acted as an assistant role, she still felt the need to continue supporting them. Her motives was rather passive and sees herself as a subordinate role to the leaders in the trade union. When asked what she gained from her involvement in the trade union, she said,

"I felt that I have changed a lot, in the past, I did not know the trade union leaders, now I know them. I was impressed by their determination to fight for workers' rights, I think I had to join in to support them, to strengthen our power, we have to do what ever we can, so I followed them to continue to fight, but seeing more and more people drop out, I felt frustrated."

She had a great deal of admiration to the trade union leaders and the organizer, and from her sharing of her experience, she still sees herself as a follower, and an assistant
to their work.

Ah Ling has gained much in raising her class consciousness and aware of the exploitation as a worker, however, she sees herself as incapable and subordinate to the leaders of the trade union, this may be due to the role model of leadership within the trade union, such as public speaking and perform in a more aggressive way in confrontative situation, which she felt that she is not able to perform and meet those expectations. This illustrated when she talked about her change after her involvement in the trade union,

"After participating in the trade union, I felt more relieved, and can see a lot more. Compared to the past, I would be scared to speak out, now I have more courage to speak to people, but still I cannot speak in the public and in front of the microphone. I would be scared to death. Maybe due to my low education level, we see very little and without much knowledge."

As for Ah Mei, she felt that she knew more about the labor laws after joining in the trade union and if she felt something unjust to them, she would forward her complains to the trade union. She also felt that she is now more confident to distribute leaflets in the streets and approach strangers when helping street mobilization activities. As she is not involved in the executive committee in the trade union, she did not feel much pressure of being incapable as strong as the other two. She just felt that whenever she is available she would support the actions. She also felt that as workers, they also should have the obligation to support the work of the trade union rather than always expecting
the trade union to serve them. She said,

"at least being workers, we should come out to support them, and to encourage them; they are very enthusiastic, and working very hard. Although we cannot do much, but in campaigns and actions, it is better to have more people to join in, so at least we as workers we should come out to support it."

The empowerment of the women workers in the trade union depends much on their performance in fulfilling the expected role model of a union leader and the leadership style. All three women workers feel empowered in a sense of widening their perception on workers' problems and feel more confident to speak out or feeling more knowledgeable. They also have gained from their involvement in raising their class consciousness and awareness as a worker. However, the hierarchical and the leadership style within the union culture will be empowering to those who can fulfill those leadership traits, will also be destructive and disempowering for those who fail to perform the expected role model of a leader, and will define themselves as the follower and subordinate to the leaders which in fact will be destructive to their confidence building and self image.

As Ah Mei explained why she did not join the executive committee,

"I know nothing ... sometimes I am not available especially in summer we have to work overtime, the meetings are always in the evening and I will not be able to come. Just bearing the name as
executive committee member and not able to do much and not knowing much is not good. So just help them by distributing leaflets in the street."

iv) Obstacles to their Empowerment

Apart from the male leadership and hierarchical structure embedded within the trade union culture which would be hindering to the empowerment of women workers, they also face the restrictions and pressure from the family due to their gender as a woman. As Ah Ling said, her husband did not like her going to the trade union activities, for the fear that she would get caught up in the political trouble. She had to prepare the meals for them and do all her housework before she could go to meetings in order to shut their mouths and her involvement in the trade union will be restricted for she had to spare her time for the family.

Ah Lin also said that she would put her priority to the family, and that if there was too many meetings, she would be unable to attend, only a few meetings in a month would be alright. Since all the housework rests on her shoulders, she has the pressure from family responsibility. She said,

"if I go out to meeting this week, then next week I would have to be absent, if I go out to meetings every week, it would not be too good, the family needs to be taken care of."

As for Ah Mei, because she is single and does not have heavy family burden, for other
siblings also shared the family responsibility in terms of caring and financial aspect, so she has less pressure from the family.

Another obstacle that they see themselves is the low education level for Ah Lin is illiterate and Ah Ling only completed education in primary two. Both of them felt that they cannot do much to help in the trade union for they do not have much education and especially those written work. They felt that this is hindering their development and participation in the activities within the trade union.

In fact, this kind of elite thinking is very deep rooted in society and although the organizer is trying hard to minimize this effect, still if there is no any counter measures to support them, this thinking will still persist. In fact, the leadership culture within the trade union will demand such ability (educational attainment) to be a successful leader and the elitist thinking still exist to dominate the thinking under the hierarchical structure within the organization.

The third aspect which hindered their involvement or to voice out their rights is the pressure of losing their jobs if being interviewed by the media. Ah Mei said she would not show her face in front of the media because her present employer hated the trade unions, and if she is being known to support or to defend the workers' rights against her employer, she would not be able to continue her work.

v) Gender Awareness

The response of the women workers was very different from that of the organizer. The
organizer felt that the union is very much embedded with male chauvanistic culture which obstruct the development of grassroots women workers, yet the women workers themselves do not feel the inequality exists in the trade union. They felt that in the meetings and overall running of the trade union are quite equal between male and female members. Although they feel the gender inequality in society, they did not feel the inequality within the trade union. In fact, all of them put low priority in their participation in the activities of the Women’s Committee, they would said they had little time to further participate in those activities, even though sometimes they would joined in the actions organized on women’s issues.

Ah Lin said she knew about the Women’s Committee but did not know what they are doing. She also said within the Garment, Clerical and Retail General Workers’ Union there are more women committee members than men members, so most of the time, it is women who take up the work. While Ah Ling said, she was too tired to involve in the work of the Women’s Committee. When asked whether they feel the need to set up a Women’s Committee, their answer was vague, and said they do not know how to comment on this. This reflected that the female workers have little information about the Women’s Committee and there was not much effort to encourage them to join in the Committee. Furthermore, the female workers did not feel the need to put gender issues into work of the trade unions and were not ready to commit to the work on gender inequality.

It is interesting enough to see the difference between the response of the organizer and the women workers on the issue of gender equality within the trade union. The women workers are not aware, or maybe do not feel the inequality that exists within the trade
union especially when their experience are mostly limited to the Garment General Workers' Union which has more female members than male members, and they have little knowledge about the overall structure and running of CTU. Their subjective experience and feelings toward the gender inequality in the organization was not sensitive and not aware of as compared to their sensitivity on the class issues and workers' rights.

However, the organizer was very aware and sensitive to the structural gender inequality that exists within the trade union and she commented a lot about the lack of space and opportunities for the development of grassroots women under the male dominant culture within the organization. This contradiction demonstrates that within the trade union context and without a feminist perspectives on the concept of empowerment, the priority of work will rest on the development of class awareness and would undermine the awareness on gender inequality. Women workers' empowerment on awareness raising will then be emphasized on class consciousness but neglect the development of their gender awareness.

To conclude this chapter, as revealed from the findings of the interviews, the trade union adopted a strong labor rights stand in their empowerment work. Their conception towards power is confrontative and that workers are under the oppression of the capitalists. In the empowerment work of female workers, they emphasized on social action approach and within which a strong trade union leadership emerged. Female workers who felt empowered were because their labor rights awareness was raised and that they could perform the attributes of a strong leader, yet they still felt themselves inadequate because they were not able to fulfil the qualities of a full male

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leader. Further discussion on their conception of power and empowerment, the strategies that they adopted and the impact on the female workers empowerment will be elaborated and analyzed in Chapter IX.
Chapter VII  The Women Organization Strategy

Part I

The women organization that was selected to be studied is Hong Kong Women Workers' Association. The reasons for studying this organization are firstly, it is an organization with a clear stated objective to strengthen women workers' rights and secondly, it focuses on organizing and empowering grassroots women workers in its program goal. The work that it carried out and the perspective that it adopted to respond to social issues and policy often emphasize on the rights of women workers as women and as workers, which reflected their perception towards class and gender oppression.

i) Background of Hong Kong Women Workers' Association

The Association was established in 1989 under the context of a campaign to defend women workers' maternity leave. A group of women activists and women workers felt that the voice of grassroots women workers was being neglected in the movement especially mostly undermined by the labor groups and trade unions. They felt there was a need to establish an organization to speak out about the concern of women workers and to organize women workers to fight for their rights. The organization is running with the financial support predominantly from overseas funding and the organizers recruited to develop the work was initially from non-social work trained activists who were grassroots female workers actively involved in the labor movement.

As the organization developed, trained social workers are recruited into the organization as organizers which as a result, the staff and members of the executive
committee is a combination of both women activists and grassroots women workers. (see attached organizational structure). The organizer who was being interviewed in this study is Lam. She is one of the key organizer working full-time in the organization for two and a half years and with a social work training background. According to Lam, the organizational goals emphasis on two main aspects,

"As a pressure group, to respond to the government and the issues related, even before women workers are organized to respond, this position is very dominant in the organization. Another aspect is to organize women workers, this aspect is still quite unclear, it seems to aim at organizing women workers to develop a kind of solidarity, a kind of relationship amongst them, yet, the women do not have that strong feeling of support and unity."

Lam said that the organization has been performing a dominant role as an advocator, to advocate the rights of women workers, yet neglected the developmental process of those women who participated,

"the advocating work is so much that even to an extend of sometimes being led by the policies of the government. In fact, during the process, we did not seriously consider those who participated in the campaign, in what ways can we implement change, to the individuals and to develop them."

The goals of the organization, to sum up, Lam stated,

"To be a policy advocator, acting as a pressure group, and
then to mobilize the women, hoping to further consolidate them and to develop amongst them the collective power and during the process to induce change within the individual, these are the main goals of the organization."

The organization adopted a clear feminist perspective toward the women workers' problems. It emphasizes the class and gender inequality and the oppression to women workers. From their response to the issue of economic restructuring reflected in many of the related campaign statement, the problem was being analyzed on a socialist feminist perspective that women workers were situated in the exploitative position under class and gender oppression and they suffered from being treated as secondary labor force, their rights are being neglected and further exploited. The strategy adopted to empower women workers under such perspective was predominantly the pressure group strategy and community action strategy. However, with the different perspective towards women empowerment, which the organizer, Lam adopted from her experience in working with the women workers, she find that there existed a disparity between the existing organizational strategy and her position toward the empowerment of women workers.

ii) The Disparity Between the Organization and the Organizer's Position Towards Women Empowerment

The organization's goals to fight for the rights of women workers and to put pressure to the government for policy change and to make public aware of the concern of the problems of women workers are predominant. The organizing work which acts as a
strategy to mobilize collective power for the struggle. Even when issues demanded immediate response and reaction, the organization will react and voice out on behalf of women workers before the organizing and mobilization of the women. The role as an advocate has been a key strategy adopted within the organization. Many issue based campaigns and women’s coalition work were carried out to speak about the needs and problems of women workers and defending their rights against discriminative policies, the role of the organization is still acting as an advocate and sometimes if time allowed, mobilization of grassroots women workers will still be carried out.

The organizer, Lam commented,

"I would agree that the ultimate goal is to induce social change through collective power, and that women workers would enjoy more rights through this. But, I would put this aspect as more secondary. In actual fact, I can see this structural change is extremely difficult, though I did not give up this ideal, but I would concern more whether the women participants have any opportunity to develop themselves during the process.

She then further elaborated the reasons for her concern,

"I would concern what actually they benefit from the activities which make them to stay behind and further consolidate so that they would be involved and get together for further advocating action on government policies. If they felt that nothing could be changed, that they could not have any achievement through the actions, then, they would leave and
in the end, only you and me to continue the struggle.

Therefore, I would put the priority of work on consolidating
the women workers, their self development and awareness
raising through reflection after the action.

The organizer felt that the organization has neglected or put a less priority on changing and developing the women workers, the conscientization process and the actual development of their ability, skills and knowledge - which then give them the subjective feeling of experiencing empowered and the sense of control. The existing strategy of the organization which emphasis on structural change for the empowerment of women workers may not be effective and often, lead to frustration and disintegration of their unity and further consolidation of collective power.

The organizer also commented,

"Little groupwork have been carried out within the organization process, the organizers play a dominant role and initiated most of the programs and actions. I think groupwork is important to develop the women's ability to organize themselves, to take initiative, and to carry out work as a collective. It is a training process, through groupwork, they would be able to acquire those skills to organize themselves and to develop the collective identity. It could also help to train up women and develop their awareness and commitment to participate in the organization at the decision-making level, such as joining the executive committee of the Association."

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Although the organizing strategy in recent years after the organization moved into the community and develop a more community based approach, the organization still adopted the advocating role if women workers are difficult to organize. The programs that carried out have been trying to be diversified, such as the organizing of women workers' cooperative, organizing women cleaners in public housing estates, drop-in service, and organizing computer classes. In some of the programs, the organizer had been trying to implement a variety of approaches for personal growth and self reflection, yet, these programs are often put as secondary to mass mobilization and advocacy work. In the situation of organizing women cleaners, if mass mobilization is difficult due to the restrictions of their work condition, the organization resumed its advocator role to tackle the issue.

Apart from the disparity in the 1) organizing strategy between structural change and personal growth, 2) the role as an advocator and a facilitator, 3) mass mobilization and groupwork approach, the organizer, Lam also pointed out during the interview that there was the lack of concern and implementation on the work of gender awareness raising within the organization. As Lam said,

"The organization very much emphasizes on the labor identity but those related to gender are less spoken out. Very little were being discussed as a woman, as a mother, point of view. Emphasis was put on the labor problems they encountered, especially seldom would the gender issues being discussed within a group context. I think, this is part of the growth of self"
of a woman, I think this aspect needs to put a lot more effort into."

Lam further stressed the importance of developing the women collective identity, she said,

"I think this kind of women identity can bring women workers more closer, can make them feel more related to each other, and further consolidate them. This is what we say solidarity and can bring greater change to the women who participated."

Lam felt that to empower women workers does not only mean only structural change to the policy and social system, it is interrelated with the empowerment of the women workers who feel empowered and make changes through their collective awareness and collective strength. Individual development and growth through the process is an important part to play, to sustain the struggle and to fight for women's rights from the women and by the women themselves.

iii) Conception on Empowerment

According to the perception of the organizer, Lam, empowerment may ultimately means changing the structural problems of inequality to women workers, yet, the process involved change within those who participated and the development of the women who involved so that they have the awareness raised to see the problem, they feel their power to change and their ability and skills are acquired to implement the change through their collective effort. As Lam stated in the interview,
"I am a bit queried about the concept of 'empowerment' now, because it is something that structurally, so far and so difficult to achieve in reality. I do not feel being empowered, and my rights have not been expanded, even after many years of struggle as a citizen. As to the women, actions and meetings with the government officials did not make any substantial change to their lives. Therefore, I now feel that, it is more important for women to have their self development through the process, during which, the women could feel that there is a space for her, that she can be listened to, that she can voice out her concern. In fact, this is a rare opportunity for women, in the family, in society, she is seldom being recognized."

Lam felt that self development of women workers is important and should put more emphasis on the empowering process of women workers. More important, is the reflection and evaluation of the experience after each and every action they participated. She could see that women workers gained their confidence during the process of meeting government officials and legislative councilors, who were the authoritative figures and that women were able to gradually show their assertiveness in front of them. But then, what after all these experiences, to transfer those experiences, into awareness and strength for further action was not easy at all.

More groupwork and collective sharing, reflection and consciousness raising is needed to further consolidate them. Individual self development to feel empowered, and the
subjective feeling of implementing change is crucial to further organize them and bringing greater solidarity amongst women workers for structural change.

iv) The Difficulties and Obstacles to Implement Empowering Programs Within the Organization

The organizer, Lam commented from her experiences in organizing,

"First of all, the government policies are extremely difficult to change under such political context, it makes the women so very frustrated. Secondly, is women do not treat work as their priority concern, which is very much to do with the traditional role of a woman. They placed family as their main concern and their personal identity. How much they would commit to fight for the work identity and workers' rights is in doubt. Even the society would not recognized their achievement and needs related to work. They will not or cannot put too much time and effort into the struggle for women workers' employment rights owing to the constrains as a woman and the limited resources available."

Apart from the structural constrains and obstacles to empower women workers, the organization also hindered the empowerment of women workers.

"Within the organization, they often adopted the 'usual' organizing strategy to work with the women workers. For example, running groupwork seemed to be a difficult task"
within the organization. In fact, groupwork could be very useful approach to develop leadership skills, collective identity and awareness building. Some colleagues would feel that this gave a lot of pressure and demanded too much commitment from the women workers. There was a lot of reservation to run groupwork. Another example is about to bring gender awareness into the programs, yet this often would be rejected within the staff team for the reason of being too personal, and might be too sensitive to the women to be discussed."

In fact, the obstacle of bringing groupwork and gender sensitivity program into the organization came from the staff team, which composed of both grassroots women organizers and social work trained organizers. The power dynamics within the team was significant to the development of the work within the organization. As a grassroots organization, women workers who came from grassroots as organizers have a different attitudes and felt more reserved to the organizing strategy. They would identify themselves easily and to an extend acted as a spokesperson for the women workers. So any innovative strategy that triggered uneasiness would be challenged. The reaction could be seen as over-protectiveness, limit the opportunities for the women workers' development, or contrary, it might be a constructive comment to further refine the programs catering for the needs of women workers. This would not be easily resolved for the staff team have to come up with a clear role that they agreed to play in organizing. More important, it is also related to whether a clear direction and perception of empowerment strategy of the organization has been stated out.
The organizing strategy can be seen as predominantly structural politics, playing the role of an advocate and at the same time, mobilizing collective power to fight for the rights of women workers. Yet, the work on the self development and sustaining solidarity amongst the women workers are being neglected. Groupwork and gender sensitivity programs are not being treated as work priority or actually not being further developed due to the unclear and confused conception towards women workers' empowerment. The strategy used was basically targeted toward structural change as an advocate and press group strategy, yet the work to substantiate personal growth and individual empowerment was being neglected.

v) Organizer's Perception on the impact of empowerment on women workers

Lam said she could see that women workers who were involved in the actions and meetings with the government officials and legislative councilors had experienced change in their self confidence and awareness toward the problems that they encountered. Although the work to reflect their experiences and further consolidation work was not enough, the women did have some change. She said,

"they did have gain much development, at least they could voice out their opinions, gained through sharing, and have the opportunities to experience different things such as holding press conference, public speaking by reading out their statement, and that they have the confidence to speak out."

These were the new experiences to the women, and they could see more and acquired more knowledge and be more sensitive
to social issues.

But how to sustain this kind of empowered experience was the crucial concern of the organizer. Lam said,

"how to make them feel it is meaningful to continue the work is the most difficult task. Maybe at the beginning, they might feel the differences and the individual growth through the process, the morale would be extremely high. But after several times of participating in those actions, the policy still did not change and that they effort seemed to be not realized. Maybe that is why most labor groups or women groups only lasted for two to three years and then disintegrated."

Lam felt that it is important that in order to sustain the women's participation and to further empower the women, there is a need to provide opportunities for them for personal development. The sense of gaining something, benefiting from the process can make them feel strengthened and that they would stay behind for further involvement.

To summarize, it is a process which involves the following aspects of change:

- Subjective feeling of empowered - gaining something and feeling in control of
- increase consciousness raising
- development of collective identity - gender and labor perspective
- action
- result
- change/no change
- reflection of the experience
It is a process in which female workers feel the need to change their situation, and through which they started to realize the social causes of their problems. This is the time when they develop their gender/workers identity / a collective identity and get together to take action. Through the action for change they become more aware of the power relation and oppression to them. The action may lead to policy change or maybe some impact to society. Reflections on their action is needed to further consolidate their unity.

vi) The Empowerer and the Empowered

The organizer related herself with the women workers on a working relationship. She said,

"I felt that I am a facilitator, the role is to facilitate them to speak their opinions, their feelings and to express themselves. I would use questions to facilitate their expression."

"Sometimes I also played the role of crisis intervention, for if they encountered any problems, they would come to you for help."

Because the Association did not provide direct service to the women as other social service organization, the dependency and hierarchical relationship between the professional and the client is minimal and the relationship is comparatively "equal" between herself and the women. But however, due to the over identification of the grassroots organizers with the women, the relationship turned into a very protective and even patronizing relationship. Lam said,
"sometimes we would be too protective to the women and often think and work on their behalf. For example, we often took the initiative to respond to the issues, to call meetings, to organize campaigns, we often took up a leading role in fear that the women would not have time to get involve. Another example is the sensitivity toward meeting with the media, even before the women expressed their reservation, we already turned down the opportunity or over emphasized the negative effect on them."

This kind of patronizing attitude created the dependency of the women on the organizer, they became passive and waited for the response of the organizer. When women felt that they had to do something to respond to the government policies, they would ask the organizers to take the leadership role instead of taking the initiatives to get organized themselves. In fact, they did not have any group/ nor collective organized platform that was developed to take action for change.

Another problem to breakthrough such dependency is the lack of training for the women workers who involved in the organization. No matter it is skills training or training to raise the awareness of the women is lacking. Due to the lack of resources in the organization and the over emphasis on structural change, the development of individuals to acquire further organizing skills and consciousness raising is not being put as priority. There was a strong emotional attachment of the women to the organizers, but lacking the identification with the organization. The collectiveness and solidarity identifying themselves with the organization is not strong. Under this kind of
circumstances, women workers are often put in a dependent position and relying on the organizer to take the lead and to take initiative to act. For example, the organizer seldom initiate the women workers to join in the association as members and relate them with the other members of the organization. The organizer will them become the main contact person of the women workers. Whenever the women workers have problems, they will only approach the organizer but not to the organization or to other women workers.

This did not only affect the growth of the newly involved women workers, but also those who have been joining the organization for a long time and even to those women workers who already are involving in the executive committee. They find little space within the organization to further develop themselves and are unclear of their roles of how to further participate and contribute to the organization development. This was actually revealed in the interviews with the women workers who expressed their ambiguity towards their participation in the organization and their needs for training and developing themselves within the process of involvement.

**Part II**

**The Women Workers from the Association**

i) The **Background of the Interviews**

The interviews were took place in the Centre of the Association. The women workers were interviewed individually and the interviews lasted for one and a half to two and a half hours. Because the interviewer has been working within the Association for years,
she already developed a trustful relationship with the women interviewees and they shared a lot of their feelings and ideas with her. The women workers interviewed were Ah Lai, Ah Yee and Ah Chung. All of them have been involved in the organization for many years and they have joined in as members of the executive committee of the Association. Both Ah Lai and Ah Yee are at the age of 40s and Ah Chung is at her 50s. All of them were previously working as factory workers and experienced the impact of economic structuring which was a demoralizing experience to them and their career. They also joined in the Association and became more aware of their rights during that time when their job opportunities were jeopardized during the restructuring period.

ii) The Women Involvement in the Association

Ah Lai, age 42 and single, she started to work in the factory at the age of 13 after finishing her primary education. She worked in a plastic factory at the beginning and as the garment industry flourished in the 70s, she then changed to work in the garment factory. The prosperity of the industry in the 80s, in which at that time allowed her to earn a remarkable wage ( $ 5000 for half a month ) since she was working very hard and often worked overtime. Working in garment industry for almost 20 years, she experienced the decline of the industry in the early 90s. Although at that time, she still had the work in the factory, the wage was much reduced because most of the work already transferred to mainland China. Seeing the unemployment and the reduced of income,( From daily income of $200 to $ 20 ) she decided to explore job opportunity from other sector.

In 1992, she changed to work as a cleaner in a beauty salon but the experience was very
humiliating for she was looked down by the customers and the employer. She felt the loss of dignity and quit the job. During the job seeking process, she was being discriminated due to her age and the low education level, it was very hard for her to find another job. After trying several jobs as cleaners finally through the personal linkage, she was able to find the office assistant job and worked until now. The salary was low when she first started this job, it could barely sustained her daily expenses. She had to take no breakfast and only ate a roll of bread for lunch to reduce her expense and saved some money to sustain her family maintenance.

The impact of the economic restructuring to her was a very negative experience, as she said,

"after walking for miles, you still could not find a job. It was a very sad experience, and the pressure was great especially I have to help the family finance."  

"I felt extremely helpless, there was no opportunities, I just had to bare with it, the helpless feeling was when the boss said 'Yes', you cannot say 'No', even if it was very unfair to you "

She further expressed her feelings of uncertainties, she said,

"Even up to now, I am still very uncertain about the job prospect, I could be fired by my boss anytime especially there could be many younger and educated women to take my place. The job insecurity is still a pressure to me."

Ah Lai felt that she needed to train up herself and to equip herself with more skills in order that she could be upgraded to secure her job.
Ah Lai started to become involved in the organization when she was still working in the factory. The most significant involvement was in 1992 when she faced the crisis of facing the decline in the garment factory. She joined in the "unemployment women workers group" of the Association and the activity at that time was to learn English and to share their frustration in facing the employment crisis. Actions were organized to defend the workers rights and due to the fear of exposure in the media, many members dropped out. Now she also felt that it is a hindrance to her involvement but at that time, she continued to join in the protest. In one of the event, she was encouraged to express her frustration and feelings through street drama, the drama was shown in a protest and to speak publicly to the media. That was a significant event to her, she realized that the effort of publicly expressing and voicing out her opinions was an impact to the government and the society. The protest action did trigger tremendous public attention and concern to the problems of women workers and did gain a great deal of media coverage. It was from then she was "awakened" as she termed it and she gained a great deal of confidence during that process. She decided to commit more of her time and effort to the fighting for the rights of women workers. As she said,

"only that you started to speak for yourself, no one will help you to fight for your rights. As a woman worker, I feel that I am doing something to defend myself and protecting my own benefit. I feel the need for women workers to speak out, to be united, otherwise no one will know about our problems."

Ah Lai joined in as executive committee member of the Association in 1994.

Ah Yee, age 40, she was unemployed at the time of the interview. Married and with two children. In fact, she had been working in garment industry for over 20 years, even
when the factory did not have enough work to do, she still continued to stay. But earning only a few hundred dollars a month, she could not sustain her living and the family needed her financial support. She felt that she had no confidence to work in the office, so she attended a course (office assistant course) in the Employees' Retraining Scheme in 1996. After the course she was lucky enough to be recruited as a contract worker in a film processing company for two years. But after the contract expired, she became unemployed. At present, she would find some temporary jobs in the factories paid on a daily basis or stayed unemployed, the employment situation is very unstable.

Ah Yee said,

"the experience of going through the economic restructuring was very hard for us. I felt the lack of confidence and the insecurity of my job prospect. I felt helpless and sad to see that after working hard of so many years, we are put in such a desperate and helpless situation. I can feel the extreme financial pressure on me as the children now grow older, that means a lot more expenses and I cannot afford to be unemployed."

"Now, I felt even more depressed and worrying for I can see that the unemployment situation is getting even worse than 3 years ago."

Ah Yee joined the Association when she was working in the factory but the reason was only due to the relationship of her friend with the organization. It was not until the time when she was underemployed and felt very insecurity and powerless about her future
job opportunity. She started to ask herself why she did not put a bit of her involvement to fight for her rights as others had been so committed to do so. In fact, she started to realized that the actions were something directly related to her living and her work situation. She then decided to try involved in the Association’s actions and campaigns to fight for women workers rights. After she had been involved in the Association activities, she joined in as executive committee member in 1996.

Ah Chung, aged 50, single. She started to work in factory as child labor at the age of 9. At the age of 12, her mother find her a job in a garment factory and from then she learned sewing and making clothes. At the age of 26, she quitted the job in the factory because her father got a sudden stroke and needed someone to look after him. Since her mother was dead and as the eldest daughter in the family she had to be the main carer in the family. For ten years, she stayed at home to take care of her father, after her father died, she went to look for factory job again. But at that time, although there was still jobs available in the garment industry, the factories were slowly closing down and moved to China. In 1993, seeing the decline of the industry, she decided to find jobs in the service sector. But looking for jobs for one whole year, she was not able to find a job due to age discrimination and discrimination to her marital status (she was being rejected as home-helper because she was not married) Also, some jobs were so low wage that she find it unfair to take those jobs. Finally she ended up in finding a dishwashing job. Later, she changed to work in a small local Chinese restaurant as waitress but working less than a month she broke her arm accidentally during work. So she lost the job. It was then she became more involved in the Association, the organizer in the Association helped her to claim back her compensation and later introduced her to her present job as office assistant.
Ah Chung started to join the Association in 1992 when she was seeking jobs in the service sector. At that time, she attended a talk in a community centre. The organizer of the Association was the speaker, and the speech which was about the impact of economic restructuring to women workers. She found the talk very thought provoking and inspired her to see more closely her situation as a women worker. Later, she joined the English class and other awareness raising activities organized by the Association. She found the exposure very interesting, as she said,

"It was a very new experience to me, very challenging ... it seems that my eyes are opened and can see a lot many things which I don't know in the past. In the past, I will not go to visit the Legislative Council, to visit welfare organization, to go demonstration. It seems that I am enlightened by all these experiences, and I seem to know much more than before."

In 1994, two years after getting involved in the Association, she joined in the Executive Committee of the organization. She is also a member of the women workers' cooperative.

iii) The Empowerment Experience

Both Ah Lai and Ah Yee started to commit to the organization's work and be more active to involve in the campaigns for women workers' rights when they started to realize that they had to do something to change their situation and they became aware of the impact of their effort to change. Ah Lai's conscientization process started after
she participated in a protest action and had a great impact on public attention to the problem. Ah Yee's determination to commit herself to fight for women workers' rights was when she became unemployed and that after an interview which she spoke about the actual situation in the decline of the garment industry in Hong Kong and received significant impact in the overseas community, she felt that she could do something to make change to her situation.

Ah Chung started to realize the need to fight for women workers' rights when she joined the Executive Committee, she said,

"even the time when I helped distributing leaflets in the street or helping signature campaign, the feelings is not so deep. Even at the time of work injury, I did not have such a strong feeling. But when I joined as executive committee as member, from the discussions and seeing how the organizers work in the Association, I see and hear more, and started to realize the different levels in society and can see things more in-depth."

She said she can see and know more about the exploitation to workers. It made her feel strongly the sense of unfairness being women workers as the employers are so exploitative especially when they are afraid to lose their jobs, there is very little voice from women workers. She then realized the need and the importance to fight for women workers' rights.

To Ah Chung, the most impressive experiences to her that made her feel strong and
build up her self confidence was sharing her experience of age discrimination in a press conference, she said,

"it was a turning point for me, I feel like in terms of giving a speech, I can learn to be better, not to be shy, become more brave, I really feel very happy."

Another significant experience to her empowerment is the setting up of the women workers’ co-operative. She said,

"at the beginning when it was just started, I was very happy, when we started to run the business and working together cooperatively. Although it was very difficult, the experience gave me hope."

Ah Chung felt that she has widened her perspective in seeing the social problems, more aware of the social issues around her and have more courage to speak for herself in front of people. The change also integrated with her daily life and her personality, she said,

"very different from the past, now I can do whatever I like, going here and there. Whereas in the past, I was very restricted by this and that, by my mother and the traditional role of women, that we should do this and not doing that. Over ten years after my mother died, I did not go to travel, go shopping, I had to take care of my brothers and sisters. Now in these few years, I feel much free and open myself for more
Ah Lai said she felt very relieved in her participation for she had a group of people to support her and shared with her. She changed a lot, for she became more confident and would not look down herself. She felt that as long as she could take the initiative to try, she could do it. She became more aware of the social issues and became more determined to speak out. She said,

"if you don't speak for yourself, there would be less voice, and there would be less attention to your problem. Of course we have to fight for our own rights and speak for ourselves, to be assertive and fight for a fair treatment."

Ah Yee felt more identified with the problems of the women workers when she became unemployed and she felt she had to do something to change the situation. As she said,

"I am being affected by the economic restructuring, I felt that I have to involved and participated to defend our rights as other women workers. I felt that I have to contribute some of my effort to the collective strengthen."

Ah Yee had a very realistic expectation to her involvement for she knew that it was a long battle and would not see immediate change easily, but the work that she do would help her to learn more and be more aware of the social issues. She felt the growth in herself and the change when she compared her sensitivity to social issues with the other workers. The empowered experience made her feel more confidence about herself, and to see the problem more clearly. She became more alerted to the social issues and
government policies especially those affected women workers. She hoped through the effort of herself and the Association, more public concern and more voice would be heard about the needs and problems of women workers. Even her identification with the working class became stronger, as she shared her feeling during the interview.

"In the past, I would not accept the cleaning work, I felt that it was too cheap. Now I begin to realize that they play an important part in society. In fact, I never would think that I would accept a job like this before but eventually I did take up a caretaker job, as casual worker, in a school for a period of time. I might do this kind of work now and would not resist it."

She said, all people should be equal, although the work they do might be different, and wages would be exploited, therefore minimal wage standard to workers is a protection.

The empowerment experience gave Ah Yee more confidence and she felt that she gained much knowledge from her experience, the feeling of togetherness and support was what she had gained in her participation. She felt that the organization was very protective to the women and it gave her the kind of easiness and warmth and concern in a genuine way. Because of joining in the activities, she became more happy and relieved from the frustration for it gave her the opportunity to share her feelings with the other women. Although she felt empowered during the process, she could still feel the structural oppression, that women workers are still in a difficult situation facing discrimination in age and education, even the unskilled jobs, it was still hard for her to get the work. The competition is becoming greater and greater and would affect her employment opportunity.
iv) Obstacles to Their Empowerment

Both Ah Lai, and Ah Yee had the reservation to show their face publicly in the media. They would accept interview with the media but had to be anonymous. This is because they worried that once identified by their employers, they would lose their job. Ah Yee also worried that her husband and family members would give her a lot of pressure if she showed her face in front of the media. This reflected that women workers encountered pressure when publicly voicing their concern due to the family and the lack of protection to workers in the existing legislation. As Ah Yee said,

"there is the lack of protection to workers in Hong Kong. As in other countries, the trade unions are strong and they could protect the workers when they openly support the actions."

Workers are put in a vulnerable position to fight for their rights in fear of losing their jobs in the Hong Kong context. As for Ah Chung, this problem had not been brought up during the interview, because her present job was introduced by the organizer of the Association and the employer knows about the Association's work. But the problem that she encountered in obstructing her participation is the pressure from work, the power struggle within the office which made her feel very depressing especially she was being looked down upon as being the lowest rank in the office. Another obstacle for her participation is her health, she is going through her menopause and often physical effects and psychological tension made her feel tired to join the activities of the Association.
Another obstacle mentioned by Ah Lai, Ah Yee and Ah Chung, is the lack of opportunity to further develop themselves, in acquiring skills and knowledge to participate in the organization's executive committee. All of them felt that they had nothing or incapable to contribute to the organization and were inadequate to help the work in the committee. In fact, there was little support from the executive committee to them for further training their organizational skills and development on their analytical thinking. They felt they were incapable to play the role as executive committee members and sometimes as Ah Lai said, she felt no confidence to express her views in the committee meetings. There were times when she tried to express her opinions and even took the effort to have it written down, the response from others were negligence and undermining her effort. She felt very disappointed. Ah Yee felt because she had to work on a night shift job for over a year, she was not able to participate in most of the meetings of the executive committee. She felt a great deal of pressure for not able to participate due to this constrain.

One can see that in the Association, there was not enough space and opportunity for grassroots women workers to participate and to further empower themselves within the organization due to the lack of training and learning opportunities and the arrangement of measures to facilitate their participation such as the meetings time. As Ah Yee said,

"I only attended the meetings as passive listener, and do not know how to contribute my opinions. Going to meetings was like a learning process for me, I could not do much to help the organization except sometimes to join the protest and actions, but still I could not show my face in the media, so it is still
very limited support to the Association."

The conversation reflected how Ah Yee felt inadequate about herself in participating the executive committee and her contribution to the organization. It was the lack of opportunity for her to further empower her ability and to gain confidence in her participation. In fact, it could be a disempowering process instead of empowering her without the necessary support to her.

Ah Chung also had such a feeling of incapability, she sees herself not able to contribute much to the organization, as she said,

"I do not have the ability to do much, I can help small things, but for big events and important things, I cannot do... everyone here is very nice to listen to my grievances at work and console me, but I have done nothing to help the Association, only giving troubles to them."

Ah Lai also commented that within the Association, there was a problem of failing to consolidate the women workers and strategies to develop them to be more committed to the work of the organization. She said,

"there is the lack of consolidation amongst the women and the organization failed to develop more core members to participate and to enhance the development of the organization. I felt that the staff and the executive committee members could do more to give each other support and to sustain the organization. The effort that put into the
development is still not enough."

"When I go out to represent the organization, I felt the lack of support from the organization, in terms of resources, information and preparation. The support is very inadequate, there needs to be more communication, more understanding, and more constructive feedback to keep us grow."

As from Ah Lai's experience, the support and space for grassroots women to be involved and develop in the organization is inadequate and the lack of space for training as well as individual development is obstructing her empowerment. She felt that there is a need to develop the support and the consolidation to keep the women together, to share their feelings and to have space to develop themselves within the organization.

v) Gender Awareness and Comment to the Trade Union Strategy

In response to the social problem of unemployment and age discrimination, both Ah Yee and Ah Lai did not feel the difference in gender inequality. This had reflected that the concern on gender perspective toward the issues were not being upheld and integrated within the organizing process and their awareness of the women's situation was still very much neglected. The oppression of women workers in their work situation and in the family was basically what they have experienced in their living and yet not being conceptualized into their perception toward the problems.

As for Ah Chung, she said this aspect concerning gender inequality was not often brought up to discuss in the meetings. She, however, had a very deep experience of
being a woman oppressed by the traditional practice and being a carer for the family as the eldest daughter in the family. She now became much open and have a different view towards the traditional ideas about male and female.

During the course of the interviews, interestingly all three of them had brought up their opinions toward the trade unions. They were sensitive to the trade union situation for Ah Yee, Ah Lai, and Ah Chung had some involvement and interaction with the trade union before. Ah Yee and Ah Lai both commented that trade union strategy was very male chauvinistic, and they built a hierarchy within the organization in which grassroots women, except with the ability to be a leader, the bright and active type, women workers voice are often being undermined and neglected in the trade unions. As Ah Lai said,

"the trade union type is very heroic style, women are dependent on men. I felt that women need to have their own rights and need to fight for their rights, therefore I think there is a need for a women workers organization."

As for Ah Chung, she had the experience of participating in a trade union's retraining class, but was being pressurized to join as member which made her feel very annoying. She said,

"Why they always have to force you to join as member and they said as workers we needed them. I do not like this kind of forcing people to join the trade union. In the Association, people will not do this, they talk to you and care about you, I can feel the concern and love, so I decided to stay with this"
organization."

This also reflected the different in approach and mentality of the trade unions and the women's organization. One is more authoritative and the other tends to be more collective.

Ah Yee said,

"the leadership style within the trade union is very different. There are political star (political leaders) to speak on your behalf, they will overshadow you, and you have to rely on them to speak your words in the legislative council."

She felt that the trade union is very realistic, if you joined as members, they would help you (in times of labor dispute) and if not you would not be put as priority of their work. That was why she felt that there was a need to have a women workers organization, for it gave her more closer feeling and more understanding as a woman in the organization. She said,

"I feel more comfortable to speak and to talk about our worries within the organization and give us more identification with each other."

The kind of sisterhood actually was built in within the women's organization, the feeling of being together as a women and the role to voice out the specific need of women workers is definite for the existence of the Association. Although personal growth and individual development as well as the work to further consolidate women to fight for their rights are still inadequate, the acceptance and identification as a
woman on equal status within the organization did give a different feeling and strengthen to the empowerment in the women workers' organization, which is different from the experience they have in the trade union.

To conclude this chapter, the findings revealed that as a women's organization, the Association has a clear socialist feminist perspective and the main strategy they adopted is social action approach. Although recently, they started to diversify their work strategy, which they started to try out community based approach and groupwork organizing, yet the ultimate priority is to fight for women workers' rights. Female workers were being empowered in terms of their awareness on labor rights but the work on raising gender sensitivity was still undermined. The sense of sisterhood was able to develop within the organization. Female workers were able to participate in the decision-making body of the organization and to work on the development of the organization. But there was lacking of support and training for them to be able to exercise their power and participated actively within the decision-making body, which they felt themselves inadequate and not useful to the organization. This is disempowering to the female workers.
Chapter VIII  The Social Welfare Organization Strategy

Part I

The organization that was selected to be studied is the Women Team of the Yang Oi Tong Community Service Centre. The organization is a multi-service community centre with the majority of the services being subvented by the Social Welfare Department. The board of directors of the centre are under the powerful influence of the indigenous leaders in the New Territories, predominantly male leaders. Various service teams are set up to serve the different needs and problems of different target groups within the community and the Women Team is one of the teams serving local women in the community. The team is a subvented service and it consisted of three staff, including the team leader, a social work assistant, and a welfare worker. Out of the three workers in the team, two are with professional social work training background. The team leader Ms. Au was being interviewed for this study. According to Ms. Au, the majority of the women they work with are between the age of 30 to 40, mostly are housewives or female single parents.

i) Background of the Women Team

The aim of the Women Team is to work towards the empowerment of women, for empowerment, the team leader Ms. Au used the term in Chinese meaning " self-strengthening", that is strengthened the women's ability, to build up their self confidence and self reliance. The empowering process is carried out in the three levels of social work intervention, casework, groupwork and community work. As Ms. Au said,

"In this setting, we put groupwork as the main focus of
empowerment work, we see empowerment can be carried out in
different ways of intervention."

For casework, which is mainly handled by the team leader, who will conduct counseling for the women who come to the centre to seek help in their drop-in sessions or refer by the other work teams in the centre. The counseling provided is usually short term and if the woman requires further in-depth counseling or follow-up work, the worker will refer her case to the Family Service Centre in the community. During the process of dealing with the case, the worker will also introduce the programs of the Women Team to the women and it serves as a way to reach women in the community. As Ms. Au said during the interview,

"we cannot do much empowering work in the casework because usually they are rather short term interaction, but through this contact, we are able to know more about the current needs and problems of the women in the community."

Through casework, they can be more sensitive to their situation which can guide them to plan their programs and activities to meet their needs and to tackle their problems.

The second level of intervention on empowerment work is groupwork, and there are three kinds of groupwork they carried out in the Women Team. The first is "individual growth" courses. Every term they will organize various individual growth courses with different themes such as interpersonal relationship skills, self understanding, parenting skills, marriage relationship, etc. These courses are to develop the women's self awareness and to build up their confidence through acquiring the skills and knowledge during the group process. The second kind of groupwork is to organize task groups
such as the single parents group and the women cooperative. They use different task and activities to develop the women’s self confidence and self reliance, and to develop their ability through working on the various tasks and activities. The third kind of groupwork is by cultural form and creative arts activities. Drama workshops and courses such as photography and painting are organized so that through these activities and body movements, the women will be able to explore their potentials and express their feelings and thoughts.

The third level of intervention is community work. The workers being the advocator will organize women to act on their problems they concern, although mass action will seldom organize, they will use open forums, media interviews and signature campaign to express their concern. The workers will also represent the organization to participate in outside platform such as women coalitions, and the cooperative effort of social service organizations. Apart from the above work, they will also organize community education programs, most of these programs are one-off basis, and to confront the tradition and dominant ideology toward women. Educational programs may consist of exhibitions, slogan or painting competitions, talks and other forms of mass programs. The themes they have organized are for example, “on the concept of women’s beauty”, “on women’s capability and potentials”, etc. These activities are to bring out the message that women should have their own choice of beauty, their self determination and the diversity of images of women. There are various virtues they will promote, that is determination, persistency, women’s strength, and self confidence. There are other forms of community work they would do, such as community surveys on themes such as sexual violence and wife abuse and some programs which are directly related to the needs of local women, for example, Ms. Au said, they are planning to organize some
formal education courses for the women because many women they contacted are between the age of 30 to 40 who are lacking the opportunity of formal education when they were young, and now hope to further develop themselves by re-entry into formal education. Since the adult education programs in the community are all in the evenings, women such as housewives and single parents will not be able to use those service. Therefore, they are planning to organize formal education classes for the women to cater their needs and to provide opportunity for them to learn and develop their knowledge.

ii) Conception on Empowerment

According to Ms. Au, the empowerment work is carried out in the different levels of intervention. Empowerment is from within and often they emphases the groupwork counseling method to help women to strengthen themselves. The individual, if they develop their inner strength, will generate a kind of power to assure their self worth, and to an extent they can also use that strength to help others and be leaders. But as Ms. Au expressed,

"if a person cannot handle their own problems, she cannot help others to work on their problems. If a person does not know how to love herself, she does not know how to love the others"

She said,

"to carry out empowerment work, one has to be sensitive to the individual needs, and not just to fight for the big goals."

She illustrated many examples from her work that she can see women changed from a
very passive and depressed condition when first joining the group and eventually through the group process, turned into a confident and self assured person. These experience happened in her single parent group and in the members of the courses she ran. Some even became as she said,

"became very powerful, they started to be very shy and feel incompetent to speak in the group at the beginning, and now they can even speak out and expressed their opinion in the public forum on the CSSA consultation meeting."

She believed that empowerment comes from the individual change, and what empowerment means is that the person develop her self worth, self confidence and make her decisions on her own with the alternative of choices. The work that she did is to enhance the individuals to explore their potentials, to be assertive of their needs and to widen their perception towards the choices that they can have when facing problems. Even the community work that she carried out in the programs, the aim is to give opportunity to the women to learn and to grow, to further assure their capability and self confidence.

In terms of gender inequality, she said,

"I feel that gender inequality has two aspect, one is the macro aspect, this is something to do with the social environment, the structural and policy level. The other aspect, which is more crucial and more important, is how the women see themselves. They have to develop their own 'self strength' in order to be strong, and not just to see themselves as in a dependent and
worthless situation. The personal strength comes from self confidence and self worth and at the same time respect the other people, once they can see themselves in a different way, the interpersonal relationship will change and the inequality will be less and they will live in a more equal terms with the other people including with the opposite sex.”

Ms. Au commented her attitude towards structural change and individual change in the empowerment context,

“in the macro level, in terms of social opportunities, men and women are unequal, many things can be done in this aspect. But on the individual level, I hope no matter it is a man or a woman, can develop his or her own personal self worth and at the same time respect the others. Very often, in the personal aspect, women are doing a lot of things to further reinforce gender inequality. Reinforcing that they are in a subordinate position, and often repeated in their personal life and men also aware of that. ”

“I feel that the women also accept their dependency status and this would limit their individual development and the development of their potentials, in the personal growth work that I am doing is to break this dependency. ”

Regarding the women’s movement and mass actions that strive for structural change, she commented that individual change is more important,
"we have been talking about gender equality for so many years, but there is no substantial change. I feel that those who talk about it are not putting it into concrete situation, and cannot implement it into the living situation. Gender equality is a silent revolution, that every person has to have change and growth is more important. Once the person see her / his self worth, the inequality relationship will change, and the change is not just come from a group of activists to fight for women's rights and yet the women do not think this is good to them and not identify with the work."

"If the women from the lower class do not identify with what you are doing to fight for gender equality, then it is no use."

iii) The Disparity Between the Women Team and the Organization

According to Ms. Au, basically they enjoyed a great deal of freehand and autonomy in the agency. She admitted that there is some constrains within the agency but this happens to all. She said,

"It depends on what kind of language you use to report to the superior and the director is quite new to the organization, the immediate supervisor is an open-minded person, so if you can convince him, then you can still do your work."

However, there exists certain compromise, as long as the issues they concern do not concern the politics of the indigenous leaders in the New Territories and is not so
sensitive that the indigenous leaders find it threatening to their position, then it is still accepted to carry out in the centre. She cited an example that she has come across tension, was related to the issue of female rights of inheritance in the New Territories, she said,

"the first day I put up a few exhibition boards concerning the issue in the reception hall of the centre, a few hours later, I was called to the director and warned not to put those exhibition boards."

She also has some other ways to get through the pressure, in terms of mass actions, they will use the group name instead of the Centre to show their support and in the actions, workers of the team will avoid to show their face in the media.

Although with the constrains, she is still quite positive by saying,

"I still think we have a lot of space, there is not many such conflicting situation happened, in fact, we are doing a lot of things regarding the livelihood of the women which are not political sensitive, maybe because of this, there is not too much problem."

As most of the work of the Team emphasis on individual enhancement and personal growth, it can still be less sensitive and not violating the dominant politics of the local leaders, yet, women issues are political issues, and de-politicizing the problems of women facing may undermine the structural oppression of women face within the actual social context.
iv) The Difficulties and Obstacles to Implement Empowering Programs

When the question of what difficulties and obstacles that the Team encountered when implementing the empowering programs, the respond from the team leader, Ms. Au was interesting and also reflected her attitude toward the ultimate importance of individual strength and determination, she said,

"I feel that it is a difficult question to be answered. Maybe I am an optimistic person, I think that all problems can be overcome, I will immediate find solutions to the problems. Sometimes, I feel that using 'problem' is an excuse, so that one can do nothing about it. Many things can be a problem, but if we see it as something to be overcome, then we will find a way out and there is no problem existed."

The only thing that she can think of to overcome in the recent situation was the low recruitment of the various courses that they publicize in this term. She said,

"I do not know exactly what the reasons for the low recruitment, maybe it is the seasonal holiday, we have approach the women members about the reason for the low recruitment, but their feedback was very positive to our work, I really do not know, but we will continue to publicize the courses, maybe in other districts of the community."

She then commented other social workers feeling that doing women's work is a difficult task, she said,
"many social workers find it difficult to organize women, they say the women do not identify with what they see and they live with ease in their situation. But I think it is not a problem to me, because I work according to their pace and start from where they are."

The things that the women concern will be taken up by the team to launch their programs, such as losing weight, beauty, parenting, etc. Ms. Au said they will start from what the women concern and through those programs, they will widen their perception toward the issue and provide an alternative perspective to them toward the issue. For example, the issue of losing weight, she will hold a seminar on this topic, the first part is about nutrition and the second part is to discuss their perception toward body fitness, and beauty image. She expressed that there is no absolute beauty, but a very subjective feeling and the women need to know what they want and what they think is beauty, it is very open and therefore the image of beauty is diversified. The message she wanted to bring across the that beauty is something what you feel and you can have your own choice, and not due to the stereotyped. As long as she feel comfortable, slim or fat is not a matter. The problem is how the women perceive themselves, and as long as they have the confidence, they can overcome it. That is why much of her work was concentrating on confidence building with the women.

The respond of Ms. Au ‘s perception toward problem and obstacles in empowerment work and her comment to the work of the social workers difficulties in organizing women clearly reflected her idea about women’s empowerment is basically individual strength and their will power. As long as the women acquire the ability to determine her
own life and her own choice with confidence, they are able to overcome all obstacles and pressure. This is an extremely individual deterministic approach that objective constrains and ideological construct do not exist. As long as the individual acquire the power to overcome with the resources and opportunities available and to face with the differences, then the problems will be resolved and the gender oppression will be overcome.

v) Organizer's perception on the Impact of empowerment on the women

According to Ms. Au, she could see the women change and feeling more empowered after attending the individual growth courses and single parents' support group in their project. She said most of the individual growth courses involved group counseling element, to deal with the inner problems of the women so that they could develop their self value and self confidence. She believed that only if the women can overcome their personal problems, they cannot help to solve other people's problems. She cited an example of some women in the single parents' group, she said,

"Some of them became already very powerful. They can start from the state of feeling afraid to speak out, or even cried whenever talked about their situation to the present state of voicing out in from of hundreds of people. This is because they started to value themselves and to love themselves through the individual growth courses."

She said in the past, she would use a cognitive-behavioral approach to help the women
and now she will work on more emotional work, to help them to overcome their emotional problems and to clear up their unfinished business. She would help to develop more opportunities for women to develop their potentials and provide resources for them to work on developing their skills and self-confidence. For example, she said,

"I can see the growth of the core members of the single parents' group. After six years of work, from individual development to collective organizing work, I will give them opportunities to develop their abilities. There is one member of the group, she is an Indonesian Chinese, quite educated and was a teacher before. She provided opportunities for her to help writing press release and gradually, the woman became more confident about herself and became more active."

Ms. Au would started from the individual need of the women as an entry point and worked according to their pace to empower them. For example, she would provide group support and organizing women cooperative to meet their financial need which through the process, the women felt more empowered for they can do something concrete and be more sure of their ability. As to sum up, she could see that women were being empowered through the activities in terms of individual growth in self-confidence and self-worth.

vi) The Empowerer and the Empowered

Ms. Au regarded her position as in a role conflict situation when relating to the women
clients she is interacting. As she said,

"I am in a difficult situation, since I am at the same time playing different roles, such as sometimes I am the organizer, sometimes I am the counselor which is a total different role and image given to the clients."

She hopes that there is a clear role division within the team, so that the other social worker in the team can play the organizer role and herself remain as the counselor role. The difference between the organizer role and the counselor is that the organizer plays a more advocating, and active role while being a counselor, has to be working at their pace and be more attentive and facilitative. She is well aware of her role as the team leader and see her role to be defined professionally, therefore she said,

"as the team leader, I would prefer to be the counselor and to know in first hand the needs of the women, so that I can give guidance to the work and planning of the team's work."

"I hope the clients will identify with us in respond to our different roles, such as if they have personal problems, they will come to approach me, and if they are working on collective action, they go to my other staff."

She will play a differential use of self in terms of role as a social worker, in action, she will play a role as an advocate, in casework, as a counselor and in groupwork as a facilitator. This is a very social work oriented use of differential self, and the control at the end is still rest with the workers for they play the role according to their assessment of the pace of the clients, and the input that they give is accordingly. An example, Ms.
Au cited in the interview,

"the women cooperative was running a stall in the fun fair, and I know that they can well handle it, so I keep myself more detach from them, so that they can try their ability to handle the problems. The detachment made them learn more and when during group evaluation, I find that they can handle it after all."

The discretion of using her intervention, and her role that she played is depended on her assessment of the clients' ability and developmental stage, thus, still under the professional guidance, the clients are able to develop themselves at their pace defined by the worker.

Another example is cited by Ms. Au, that she worked more in a friend basis with the women in the Women Service Consultative Committee. The committee is consisted on 6 women members, all experienced and selected by the workers, and with the three workers of the Team. The women give their opinions to the service of the Team and as as a consultative agent to the programs they conducted. Yet the final decision making rests on the workers and the committee is still a consultative nature. Ms. Au said,

"it is an opportunity for the women to widen their perception, and to realize their ability."

It is a learning opportunity for the women but in the end, the control still is in the hands of the workers and under their assessment of who is to be selected into the committee. The empowerer is still the professional with their own knowledge and skills to be exercised while the empowered are within the context under the 'enhancement' and
guidance of the empowerer.
Part II

The Women from the Centre

i) Background of the Interviews

The interviews were took place in Yang Oi Tong Community Service Centre. They were individually interviewed and the interviews lasted for one to one and a half hour. The researcher was introduced to the women by the Team leader, Ms. Au and the aim of the study was explained to the women by the research. Time was given to the women for clarifying their queries and to seek their consent to taping the interviews. Although it was the first time for the researcher to meet the women, they were all very friendly and felt easy to share their thoughts and feelings during the interviews. The women being interviewed were Ah Hing and Ivy. Both of them are at the age of over 40 and they have been involved in the Centre’s Women Team for some years. Ah Hing is divorced and now a single parent with two children, aged 9 and 11, while Ivy is a full time housewife, with two children aged 16 and 17. The third woman being interviewed was Ah Wai, she is also a single parent with a son aged 16 and a daughter aged 17. Her husband passed away since 1987. Ah Wai is now 53 years old.

ii) The Women Involvement in the Centre

Ah Hing joined the single parents’ group of the Centre in 1992, she was introduced by a friend in another centre to join the group. The single parents mutual support group organized social activities and outings and at the beginning Ah Hing brought her children together to join those activities because everything was organized by the workers and more convenient for a single parent to participate. After joining the group,
she gradually also involved in volunteer service activities such as visiting the elderly home and as the social worker, Ms. Au extended the nature of the group, she participated in the activities to concern their rights for most of the group members are CSSA recipients. She is also a member of the Women Service Consultative Committee. Ah Hing is now an active member of the women’s cooperative. The aim of setting up the cooperative is to develop an alternative work opportunity for women and the cooperative is running a business to provide home caring and child caring service. Ah Hing said she hope this can help her to develop a possible job opportunity so that she can stop relying on social security (CSSA), although the business is still in a very small scale and cannot afford to sustain her living, she find that she can learn a lot from the experience.

Ah Hing was also a garment factory worker before, but as the industry diminished, she find a job in the 24-hours shop and needed to take night shifts. Because of taking care of her children she could not continue to work and started to live on social security.

As for Ivy, she joined the Centre activities since 1994 and she had attended in many courses including individual growth courses such as interpersonal relationship, marriage relationship, self understanding and parenting skills, she also joined courses provided by the Employees' Retraining Scheme, learning English, typing, etc. She said she liked to learn a lot of different things and to seek different knowledge through those courses. The initial reason for her to join the personal growth courses run by the Women Team was during that period she had experienced unhappy family relationship with the in-laws, especially with her mother in-law. It was a very difficult situation for her to cope with living together with her mother in-law and there was a lot of personal conflict. She
find that she could not express herself and she hid her feelings by internalizing her frustration and was very depressed. In order to resolve the problem, she attended the individual growth course on interpersonal relationship and gradually she became more aware of herself and to be more considerate, to stand on the other people's position to see things. She said she was much happier now for she knew how to make compromise and not to be so stubborn as before.

Ah Wai joined the Centre in 1994. At that time, the government was going to review the Social Security system and being a recipient of social security, she find that she had to do something to defend their rights because they were living meagerly on the allowance. So she started joining in the activities they centre organized to voice out their needs and problems. She had experienced the humiliation from the social welfare officer and felt very angry and helpless about that incident, she told the interviewer,

"talking about it makes me sad, the officer told me that my son has reached the age of 15 and he told me to go out to work. I am already 50 years old, and have been seeking jobs for a long time, it is not that I do not want to work, to be lazy, but no one take me. I want to go to work, but there is no job, what can I do?"

The officer even said,

"you look so unpleasant, so naïve, with such a low standard. If I were the boss, I would not employ you!"

This was really humiliating to her and she told the team leader about it. She wanted to complains about this, but the team leader said she could do this when she met the chief
officer. She felt that being a social security recipient also should have their dignity and she did not want to be lazy to get the allowance. She had been trying hard to find jobs, but the employers always prefer younger women. She felt being a beggar, to beg for living when receiving the welfare allowance.

iii) The Empowered Experience

Ah Hing felt that she has changed a lot after involving in the activities of the Women Team, she said,

"I became more confident, in the past, I was very shy, now I have more courage to try. I have to appreciate the social worker who gave me opportunity to participate in different kinds of work so that I can have much training opportunities."

Apart from being more verbal and expressive, she find that she had opened up her social circle and much more exposure, she said,

"at the beginning I only joined the single parents group, and later, Ms. Au set up the Women Service Consultative Committee and gave me the opportunity to participate in the work, and the level of exposure became much widened, apart from grassroots women, I can also get to know people with different background for example those cultural activities."

She became more willing to learn new things and things that she did not know. Her
motivation to change is to learn new things to upkeep herself and to expand her space to develop herself.

The reasons for her to sustain her involvement and participation are the kind of mutual understanding that she get from the single parents group because the members are from similar background and there is the mutual support that she cannot get from other group. She also find her involvement meaningful, as she said,

"Because I can overcome those difficult time, and I also hope that I can give other women who are unfortunate the support they needed."

"In fact, the involvement allowed me to see that many women are even more unfortunate than me, and that I am not the worse kind, so that I should not feel sad about myself, I became more confident, afterall, we still have to face the odds and that is why we have to be strong."

Contrary to the concept of empowerment, this feeling of less unfortunate in compared with the others may create the kind of fatalizing the problem of marriage breakup and that women are unfortunate when facing divorce, accepting the powerless situation that the marriage is unsuccessful. This kind of powerless also existed when she mentioned her perception towards herself as a social security recipient,

"Even up to now, I feel unhappy. Friends and relatives think that it is not right, it seems that you do not need to work and take social security assistance. I feel bad about it, it looks like I am a dependent in society. If I can find another alternative, so
that I can earn my own living but the children are still young, it would be difficult to find a job that could sustain the family living."

That is why Ah Hing joined in the women cooperative hoping to develop an alternative job opportunity to be more financially independent. In order to overcome this powerlessness, she has the eagerness to learn new skills and to develop herself so that she can break away from taking social security. This also reflected that her belief in strengthening her individual ability to overcome the social deprivation and discrimination, yet the structural causation of the problem was being neglected and individualizing the resolution to the social problem.

As for Ivy, she felt that after participating in those individual growth courses and skills learning classes, she became more understanding to other people's feelings and became more considerate in interpersonal relationships. She also felt that she became more confident about herself especially in interacting with other people. Her relationship with her mother-in-law and with her children has improved. She realized that she has to love herself and to give more space for herself to develop. As Ivy said,

"very often in interacting with others, you have to up keep yourself, otherwise you will be scared and lack of confidence. If you do not strengthen your self confidence, you will be feeling very harsh."

As for Ah Wai, she had overcome her grief of losing her husband when she joined the other single parents' group in 1988. It was a support group and all the members were
single parents, they talked a lot and she finally overcome her feelings of being unfortunate. Then members of the group started to join in Yang Oi Tong’s single parents activities, and from there she became more socially aware of her situation and developed her awareness to defend her rights as social security recipient. But when asked about her change after participating in the actions organized by the Centre, she said,

"I feel that I am not as stubborn as before, before I was very stubborn, now I will listen to others opinions and will learn from other people who might have better ways of doing things."

She also said she has widened her perception towards things, and will look forward and mainly from her subjective experience. She became more positive toward life. She said,

"now, I become not too stuck on to the past, be more open and more tolerance and more forgiving."

From what Ah Wai said, she has gained a wider perspective in looking at her situation and social awareness, but what made her feel more important is her personality change, in be less stubborn and learning to be more tolerance and forgiving then before. The feeling of empowerment is still rested with her own personality growth.

Ivy seldom participated in the social concern activities and community education programs, she experienced her empowerment on her individual level and the change that she experienced was through the courses that she participated in which she learned new perceptions towards interpersonal relationship and her attitude towards facing
difference and conflict in human relationship, she became more compromising and she felt she became more confident about herself. This subjective feeling of empowerment gave her strength to face up to problems, yet still, the structural gender inequality that existed within her living creates constrains to her self development and her social involvement.

As all of them feel empowered through the involvement, in terms of personal growth and feeling more confident, but their relationship with the empowerer is still a follower, rather than a partnership based relationship. As Ah Mei said,

"we are good friends, we can share a lot, they can 'help' us a lot, even not able to help us but will give us some opinions. Sometimes they are good friends, sometimes they are good teachers. Teach us how to do, because they know more, about the legal knowledge, they know a lot more."

Further to that, she said,

"we have to fight for our rights, I listened to the social workers what they teach us, she leads us then we know what to do. After that, we know how to do, and do what when there is action."

Ah Hing also expressed her gratefulness to the social worker who gave her the opportunities to learn and to have more exposure, especially inviting her to participate in the Women Service Consultative Committee in the Centre. Ivy also mentioned about her feelings towards the social workers, she said,

"They are professionals, there are many things that they can provide us with different views. Maybe they are
professionals, they can handle things much better than we
do. So I hope to learn more from them."

Their relationship with the empowerer is still rested in a helper and helpee role, and the
professional role as an authority and knowledgeable person is rested with the organizer.

iv) Obstacles To Their Empowerment

Both Ah Hing and Ivy encountered pressure from family responsibility when
participating in the empowerment programs. Ah Hing is a single parent and she has to
look after her two children. When they were still young, the children would follow her
to the centre but now they grew older and did not like to follow her to join in the
centre's activities, so she could only find time to go to the centre when they go to
school and she would not be able to participate in the evening activities or when the
children are off school. This also reflected that the childcare support available to
single parents is inadequate and is hindering them to further develop themselves and
confining their community involvement.

As for Ivy, she did not see any obstacles that hindered her participation in the programs
but when she expressed about her family attitude towards her involvement in the
courses, she said her husband showed dislike and verbally disagreed that she
participated in the evening courses or programs. He is rather traditional and would use
the excuse that no one to look after the children to make her stay at home in the
evening. So Ivy could only joined those courses at daytime. She would see this as
concern rather than restriction from her husband, but in actual fact, the family
responsibility and her role as a carer did limit her space and opportunity to develop herself. The gender division of labor in which women are often confined in the family caring role and the lack of supportive services to relief women from the burden of family responsibility is often one of the obstacles that limit the opportunities for women to empower themselves. Furthermore, women themselves would also feel that it is their responsibility and role to play and would try to fulfil such expectations at the expense of their self development.

To overcome such limitations is not easy, apart from the necessary provision of childcare support and facilities to release their family burden, women themselves also have to be aware of their rights as an individual and that it is a gender problem that creates such constrains to their participation in the activities.

Ah Wai has less family burden for the children have grown up now and she could participate in the activities whenever she has time. The only obstacle that she faced is when she has to work part-time and she will have to adjust her participation. Another problem that she brought up during the interview is the worry of showing her face in front of the media. She said her children did not like it, so she would never show her face, even if she was being interviewed, her face would be hide from the camera.

v) Gender Awareness

Ivy has a greater response to gender inequality because she has experienced from her relationship with her husband. She said,

"There is still unequal relationship, my husband when return
home after work would not help me to do the housework, he
saw himself as the breadwinner, earning money and me to
remain at home to do the housework."

But both Ah Hing and Ivy said, nowadays women and men are becoming more equal
and a lot of women already are very strong and capable. They did not seem to have
strong feelings toward the gender differences and the oppression that existed which
limit their development. Ah Wai also mentioned the gender inequality and the age
discrimination situation when seeking jobs as she said the people will tell you to return
home to take care of the grandchildren since you are too old and give opportunities for
men and those younger ones to do the job. But she felt now maybe there are most
women's organizations, the situation is better because more people talk about it and
more people are aware of it.

During the interviews, they emphasized their growth and development through
learning, skills training and widening their exposure. They have a very optimistic
attitude towards their situation and would see that from their own effort and will power,
to overcome the difficulties and problems they encountered in their existing situation.
Ah Wai also mentioned that she has to prioritize her concern now to plan her future
especially now she got pressure from the Social Welfare Department to cut her
allowance and she needed to work to earn her living.

The structural limitations of gender inequality was never mentioned as a cause to their
powerless situation. They only expressed their views when the interviewer posed the
question to them. It was mentioned briefly by Ah Wai and Ivy, who had experienced the
inequality from their experiences at home and in the job seeking process. However, they all felt that the situation is already getting better and women already have achieved better status and better conditions then before.

To conclude this chapter, the organizer’s conception on empowerment of female workers was to strengthen their individual potentials, the growth of their self worth and self confidence. Through the process of group counseling and the provision of opportunities for development of their knowledge and skills to handle their problems by themselves is the goal of empowerment. From the findings of the interviews, the women expressed their change and the growth of self confidence and self worth, the urge to further develop themselves to acquire more knowledge and work ability was definite. The power relation between the organizer and the women was still remained as hierarchical, as the organizer took up a professional social worker’s position while the female workers remained as clients to be empowered by the empowerer and feeling grateful to the help and opportunities that the organizer had granted them.
Chapter IX Discussion

In this chapter, the author attempts to apply the theoretical concepts to the collected data and to analyze the findings by highlighting the three focused areas within the empowerment discourse. The three areas specifically discussed are, firstly, the conception of power and empowerment by the three organizations; Secondly, the empowerment experience of the grassroots women under the different empowering strategies of the three organizations; and Lastly, the power relations between the empowerer and the empowered. Amy Allen’s analytical framework on the concepts of power, that is, power as resource, power as domination and power as empowerment, will be adopted for understanding the three organizations’ conception on empowerment. The foreground and background perspective suggested by Allen for understanding power relations will be applied to analyze the power relations between the empowerer and the empowered within the three organizing context. As to conclude, the author will try to synthesize the analysis in relation to the empowering strategies of grassroots women and its implication to the women’s movement in the Hong Kong context.

1. Conception of Power and Empowerment

The empowerment strategies adopted by the Women Committee of the Confederation of Trade Unions, the Women Workers Association and the Women Team of the Yang Oi Community Service Centre, include components aimed at encouraging individual development, acquiring of skills, collective participation and social action to facilitate personal, interpersonal and social change. But each is very different in the way they put their emphasis on the work of empowerment and the programs vary in their application.
of personal versus structural concepts of change. Empowering women means a process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that women can take action to improve their situation. What strategies adopted to gain power and the focus of the change process is determined by the political ideologies and the perspectives toward the meaning of empowerment held by the organizations especially related to their conception of power and the power relations.

From the findings of the study, there exists two levels of understanding the standpoint and conceptions towards women's empowerment by the organizations. The first level is their gender perspectives and the second level is their understanding on the meaning of power and empowerment. From the strategies and the work direction that each of the organization adopted, reflected that they held a different political understanding within the empowerment discourse. The following is the analysis of the organization and their perspectives towards women empowerment.

The Gender Perspective

The Confederation of Trade Union adopted a union strategy which put their work emphasis on the concern of workers' issues and the struggle for workers' rights. The Women Committee under the Confederation was being marginalized without much organizational support in terms of resources and human power allocated to promote their work. As the organizer commented,

"workers' issues are always the priority of concern within the trade union, ... if you want to put women workers concern into the agenda, you have to take the initiative yourself. "

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The trade union did not have a clear perspective toward gender problem and did not take up gender issues as their main concern. The Women Committee is running under the effort of mainly one person as this was revealed in the interview by the organizer that,

"If you do not plan for the development and just push everything onto one person's responsibility, that person cannot do a lot, ..."

Basically, to the trade union, workers' rights is women's rights, they did not put women work as their priority and remain a low input and high output strategy to sustain an image of concerning women workers' rights. In fact, as from the comment of the organizer, there was little space within the organization for women to develop and to be empowered, especially grassroots women. It is embedded with male chauvinistic culture in which women will feel intimidate when participated in those activities, this including outside conferences to internal organizational meetings. As the organizer expressed in the interview,

"All they talk about in those conferences are high sounding, broad basis, and vague without much substantial ground. When women go to meetings, some men will comment: 'those women are not doing anything when going to meetings, they only stay for a while and leave.' The men don't understand that women still have to worry about their families, their homes. After meetings, the men will go out for drink, how could the women get involved into their circle! Did they ever consider the condition of women? They keep on talking and talking, women especially those who are new to these kind of exposure, how could they participate?"

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The organization, although with the existence of the Women Committee, the work and the culture within including the staff attitudes are gender insensitive. The organizer find it very hard to get the support from the other organizers in the trade unions to cooperate with her in organizing gender sensitivity activities, she said,

"Everytime I see those men in the trade unions, I would ask them to 'pass' the women to me, to send them out, so that I can reach them. But I can't even get in touch with them, how can I do anything, it's so difficult... so due to the lack of time and staff, it is very hard for me to do it alone."

It is because under this context, the empowerment initiatives that organized by the organizer was not being well received and difficult to carry out within the organization, especially when those programs such as the Learning Circle which were targeted to women workers on personal empowerment and not social actions. Basically, there is no clear gender perspective within the trade union strategy and the emphasis is on workers' rights and workers' empowerment and the Women Committee is playing a role to organize women workers as a target group because of their workers' identity rather than their gender.

The Women Workers Association adopted a clear position on gender and class perspective. The organization aimed at carrying out work to fight against the oppression of gender and class inequality that women workers faced and the empowerment of women is to struggle against the oppression so that women can gain back their rights and equality. Politically, the organization adopted a socialist feminist perspective toward the problems, that class and gender are interlocking spheres of oppression and their involvement in both fronts of coalitions of labor groups and
women groups reflected this position. As stated in their pamphlet introducing their organization's objective:

"to fight for women workers' rights as women and as workers."

The organizational goals is to fight for women workers' rights, as women and as workers, to put pressure to the government and related authorities for policy change and to build up public concern of the problems of women workers. However, the emphasis is on structural change as priority and neglects the importance of the process of change, developing the awareness raising and solidarity amongst the women workers.

As the organizer from the organization said in the interview,

"As a pressure group, to respond to the government and the issues related, even before women workers are organized to respond, this position is very dominant in the organization. Another aspect is to organize women workers, this aspect is still quite unclear, it seems to aim at organizing women workers to develop a kind of solidarity, yet, the women do not have the strong feeling of support and unity."

The organizer has a different view, and did not agree to such an approach because it was not able to empower the women on their personal level, she stated in the interview,

"I would agreed that the ultimate goal is to induce social change through collective power, and the women workers would enjoy more rights through this. But, I would put this aspect as more secondary, structural change is extremely difficult... I would put the priority of work on consolidating the women workers, their self development and awareness raising through
reflection after the action."

There was the lack of gender sensitivity activities carried out for the emphasis was mostly on the struggle against the domination of the class and workers' exploitation. Intensive work to strengthen the women workers' self awareness and developed their gender awareness or even leadership skills training was inadequate. As the organizer expressed,

"little groupwork have been carried within the organization process, the organizers play a dominant role and initiated most of the programs and actions. It is a training process, through groupwork, they would be able to acquire those skills to organize themselves, and to develop the collective identity. It could also train up women and develop their awareness and commitment to participate in the organization at the decision-making level, such as in the executive committee of the Association."

The Women Team of Yang Oi Community Service Centre adopted a perspective toward gender problem that structurally women are lacking the equal opportunity to develop themselves and under the gender stereotype of the traditional thinking women are faced with unequal treatment and the lack of choice and resources to develop and to grow. The aim of the Women Team is to provide opportunities for the women to strengthen their ability, to build up their self confidence and self reliance. The team leader in the interview expressed,

"The individual if develop their inner strength, will generate a kind of power to assure their self worth, and to an extend they..."
can also use that strength to help others and be leaders."

The understanding of the gender issue can be broadly be identified as between liberal feminist perspective in which the lack of equal opportunity and the patriarchy is seen as the cause of gender problem. The organization has a strong emphasis on the capacity building aspect and the equal opportunity of choices. The team leader shared her views which reflected this,

"empowerment comes from the individual change, and what empowerment means is the person develop her self worth, self confidence and make her decisions on her own with the alternatives of choices."

She further elaborated,

"In the macro level, in terms of social opportunities, men and women are unequal, many things can be done in this aspect. But on the individual level, I hope no matter it is a man or a woman, can develop his or her own personal self worth and at the same time respect the others. Very often, women are doing a lot of things to further reinforce gender inequality, reinforcing they are in a subordinate position..."

This reflected that the need for increasing social opportunities for women is important, but at the same time she emphasized much on the individual capacity to overcome the obstacles and that women themselves are reinforcing their subordinate position. This in fact is the lack of gender consciousness which further subordinates women’s position. However, if overemphasizing the individual strength to combat the social oppression, it could easily fall into "blaming the victims” position.
The Meaning of Empowerment – and the conception of power

According to Amy Allen’s analysis on the conception of power, power as resource, power as domination and power as empowerment, reflected clearly in the findings of the study which reveals that the conception of power is crucial to one’s meaning of empowerment. Using the above framework the three organizations perspectives towards empowerment is to be analyzed in the following.

The three organizations in this study adopted different focus on empowerment which was revealed in their work emphasis and their conception of power clearly indicated from their perception and strategies on empowerment. Even the Chinese wording of empowerment used by the organizers being interviewed reflected their conception of power and their focus on the level of empowerment. It is obvious that the organizer from Women Workers’ Association used the term in Chinese （充權）as empowerment meaning “to gain power”, for in their conception of power, the domination is to be resisted, and to gain power is the priority and determining strategy to empower women against oppression through actions. The power relations within class and gender are conflictual.

The team leader from the Women Team of Yang Oi Community Service Centre used the Chinese term （自強）as empowerment meaning “self-strengthening”, meaning the strengthening of one’s capacity including one’s confidence, skills and ability. This shows that her perception towards empowerment is related to her conception of power as resource. That power is not a zero-sum and women can get to gain power through
the enhancement of their abilities, acquiring of more social resources and more opportunities to develop themselves. The conception of "power to" which emphasizes the capacity to develop oneself is adopted.

As for the organizer of the Confederation of Trade Union, she did not specifically use the term 'empowerment', but related to the experience of women workers in gaining their rights and sometimes used "self strengthening" in meaning empowerment, the term is not interpreted consistently. This is not hard to understand, as the trade unions are putting the focus on workers' issues and workers' rights before gender equality. As the organizer said,

"In the trade union, a Workers' Affairs Committee have been set up to concern workers issues, even without the committee, workers' issues are always the priority of concern within the trade union."

The conception of power is basically related to workers' (male workers) rights and their power relations between the capitalists and the workers which is conflictual and the goal is to resist the domination of class exploitation. This can be shown from their use of strategies, mainly action oriented and confrontative with a strong male leadership within the trade union struggle. As the organizer shared,

"the majority of the executive committee is male members, and very few members involved. At that time, only one out of the 18 exco. Members, now 3 to 4 female members out of the total of 24. It is difficult for the exco. To initiate concern on women workers' issue, but they will pick up workers' issue definitely."

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Further to that she commented,

"the main kind of work we do is to deal with labor disputes cases, and to organize action to fight for workers' rights. Action is the main strategy."

Although to the organizer, she would hope that building the capacity of the women workers could be her goal to empower them, but there was so much constrains that she find it very difficult to carry out.

Due to the different conception of empowerment, different strategies were used to empower the grassroots women. From the findings of the study, it is quite obvious that the Women Workers Association put their focus on empowerment on the gaining of political power of women workers, their conception on power is the domination from class and sex. Apart from emphasizing on social action and organizing collective power of women workers to fight for their rights, they also see their role as an advocate and a pressure group to assist women workers in gaining their political power. The emphasis had been criticized by their organizer as neglecting the individual growth and development of the women, especially the failure to use groupwork as a strategy for consolidating the women. Social actions mobilized by the organizers often lack further consolidation and building up of group identification and group consciousness. As from the feedback of the women workers being interviewed, they also expressed that their ability and skills to organize and to participate in the executive committee was inadequate, which as a result hindered their participation and influence in the committee. This revealed the lack of development in empowering of the women on the interpersonal level.
Contrary to the focus of Women Workers' Association, the Women Team of Yang Oi Tong Community Service Centre emphasized their empowerment work on the personal level. This is very much related to their conception of power as resource, and that building women's strength and ability is their first priority. As the team leader expressed during the interview, the focus of their work is aimed at strengthening the women's self-confidence and self-worth through acquiring of skills and awareness raising. Although there are different intervention methods adopted, they put groupwork as the main focus of empowerment work which includes personal growth groups/courses, task groups and cultural and art creative groups. They believe that empowerment comes from individual change, and that once the women see themselves in a different way, the interpersonal relationship will change and the inequality will be less and they will live in a more equal terms with the other people including the opposite sex. This is also reflected from the feedback of the women who were being interviewed as they felt the importance of personal development and the enhancement of skills and knowledge through training and sharing sessions. Although social actions were also carried out through their single parents' group, the emphasis of the activities such as open forum, were on the enhancement of individual's ability and exposure of the women rather than the structural impact. Empowerment on strengthening the women's interpersonal skills also had been carried out in their programs, through courses on interpersonal relationship, the women gained more knowledge and skills to relate to the other people and in family relationship.

As for the Women Committee of the Confederation of Trade Union, there is no doubt that the Union employed a strong emphasis on social advocacy and action strategy, eventually the empowerment of women workers thus focus on political level, and the
conception of power as domination from class exploitation, yet without the gender perspective. The findings from the interview with the organizer revealed that there existed the disparity between the organizer and the trade union orientation on the strategy. This was reflected from the effort of the organizer to organize individual growth activities, the Learning Circle, on raising gender consciousness for the women workers. Yet, the response was frustrating and there was lack of support from the organization in terms of resources and co-operation. Initiatives to foster personal empowerment for capacity building were not encouraged within the trade union.

**Strategies of empowerment**

The three organizations that were studied employed different emphasis on strategies to empower women under their different perspectives on gender and conception on power and empowerment. This has indicated that the conception of power and empowerment has significant impact on the strategies employed. All three organizations did employ casework, groupwork and action strategy in their empowerment practices, but the rationale and their main emphasis has significant difference. For example, the Confederation of Trade Union handled mainly labor dispute cases, emphasizing on gaining workers' rights and compensation under the existing labor ordinance. Casework and labor disputes issues are ways to engage women workers into the trade union and their empowerment work emphasis mostly on social action strategy under a clear union leadership who also is a political figure in the Legislative Council. Thus very often, the social actions are mobilized in line with proposed legislative change to protect workers and trade union rights. Very seldom group work is being organized especially those related to personal growth, only seldom with a great deal of extra
effort, the organizer of the Women Committee would self initiated such programs. But from her experience, the response was rather frustrating and lack of the support from the organization for it fell outside the main strategy of the trade union.

The Women Workers' Association had tried to diversify their strategies to organize women workers in recent years, yet their main strategies used are social action and advocacy work. Their use of casework was minimal, only if those cases are related to the issues that the organization is aiming to mobilize for social action. For example, they will handle labor disputes cases if the clients are female cleaners in public housing estates because it served as a strategy for them to build up relationship with the women for further mobilizing and organizing to combat the issues of subcontraction system which greatly exploited the low income women cleaners. Computer classes, women cooperatives and some self development courses were organized but often these efforts are fragmented and secondary for social action strategy and advocacy on policies that affect women workers' rights are still their work priority and work emphasis to empower women workers. The social action strategy neglected the importance of group work organizing, women workers were often mobilized to act on certain issues and yet further consolidation by group work effort did not exist. The organization put a lot of effort on the advocacy role in response to current policies and sometimes without grassroots mobilization. This reflected that the organization stressed the importance of the structural change rather than organizing women for change on the empowerment discourse of women workers.

The Women Team of Yang Oi Tong Community Service Centre emphasized on the empowerment of women through group work strategy to enhance the ability of the
women. Although they also handled cases and organized community programs, but cases would only serve as a channel to reach women in the community and to engage them into their groups. Community programs would be served as a strategy to raise awareness of the women for personal growth and individual change and public education. The use of group work which emphasis on personal growth, to build up self confidence and self worth, were carried out through personal growth courses, single parents group, women co-operatives, women service consultative committee, and cultural and creative art courses. Under the conception of power as resource in relation to the empowerment of women, group work is used as their priority of strategy to equip women with more resources, including their awareness, their skills and knowledge.

The conception on women empowerment and strategies adopted by the three organizations being interviewed in this study thus can be analyzed as the following simplified framework:

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<th>Political Perspectives</th>
<th>Confederation of Women Workers</th>
<th>Women Team of Y.O.T.</th>
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<td>On Gender</td>
<td>Conflicts of socialist feminism</td>
<td>liberal feminism</td>
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<td>class conflict, Marxist feminism</td>
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<td>Conception on power as</td>
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<td>Sense of power</td>
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II. The Empowering Experience of the Women

According to Kieffer (1984) and Torre (1985), "powerlessness is particularly a common condition perceived by groups in society discriminated against by the general society, such as lower socio-economic, ethnic minorities, women, the aging population and the handicapped." As individual experience powerlessness in relation to their environment, the experience is internalized and they see themselves as helpless. Empowerment is a process as Torre defined, "through which people become strong enough to participate within, share in control of, and influence, events and institutions affecting their lives."

This is a transformation process from the state of powerlessness to the state of powerful and taking in control of one's lives. In fact, powerlessness is not exclusively an individual problem. Its origin is usually socially structured but not due to individual personal defeats. Therefore, individual empowerment may not fully actualized by the powerless because of the obstacles and oppressive conditions faced by them. The change of social structure that enable individual a fuller development of capacity is also important. The transformation process is thus required to be happenings at all levels, including personal, interpersonal and political. (Gutierrez, 1990)
In this study, the findings from the interviews of the women who were involved in the empowerment activities illustrated their process of change. The following analysis is based on their experiences and four aspects will be discussed in relation to their change process. The four aspects are:

1. Their Involvement: Under what conditions were they get involved into the activities
2. The significant change process and events
3. Obstacles to their empowerment
4. Impact of change

The reasons for selecting the above four aspects are because, firstly, their conception towards power will be affected from where they are situated and from there, their involvement started. Secondly, empowerment is a process of change, the impact of the empowerment strategies will show from their change process. Thirdly, the obstacles they encountered will help us examine the constrain of the women’s condition and the problems that certain strategies when carried out. Finally the impact of change, is to learn from the women’s experiences, what they subjectively feel after participating in the empowering process.

Their Involvement

All the women who were being interviewed expressed that they were confronted by problems that they felt difficult to handle when they first joined the organisation. The women workers who experienced the close down of the factories under the impact of economic restructuring were feeling helpless to their employment situation. Each of them either experienced labor disputes due to close down of the factories,
unemployment from redundancy, difficulties in finding new jobs, age discrimination, all of the experiences created the sense of lack of control over their lives, frustration and helplessness.

As for the others who joined Yan Oi Tong Community Service Centre activities were in a state of being confronted by problems of divorce, welfare policy change which affect her livelihood as single parents and the in-laws family relationship. The feeling of losing control over one’s life and the lack of support was the state that motivated them to join in the programs of the Centre. No matter the forces came from internal or external situation, the result was that they experienced the feeling of powerlessness, the lack of control over their life situation, which they hoped through their involvement would create changes to that situation. The motivation to change under the powerless condition is the key to their involvement into the programs offered by the organizations, although most of them perceived the problems as their own individual inadequacy.

The Change

Although originated from a state of powerlessness, the different strategies that based on the different conception of power and empowerment have significant different to their interpretation of their situation and understanding of the power relations of their powerless state.

The change that occurred in the women involved in the programs had a significant difference between those who participated in social action to change their situation and
those who engaged in self development programs and self help group. The women workers from the trade union, Women Workers Association and the single parent who joined in the action against the social security policy expressed that the actions made them realized their ability to effect change to their environment, including public responses, societal concern to the issues and media coverage. The experience gave them the insights to redefine their situation and their ability to take control of their situation and it raised their awareness toward the relationship between political structures and their personal situation. As one of the women said, she felt awakened, and the other said, she acted in order to make her voice being heard. There was the development of class consciousness, and assuming personal responsibility to act and reducing of self blame. However, the feeling of increasing self efficacy was still not obvious for they may realized the collective strength but their ego strength and sense of personal power was not strengthened much. This reflected that their self capacity was not being developed to an extend to be sure of their ability and analytical power to the situation. This was revealed by the women workers in the trade union and in the Women Workers’ Association, their lack of skills and ability to work in the executive committee and as a follower role under the union leaders and organizers.

As for those who experienced the change through personal growth groups and self help groups, their feeling of change came from learning of skills and knowledge to overcome the sense of powerlessness and the mutual support from the members of the group. The experience gave them a sense of togetherness, breaking the sense of isolation. The initial change seemed not related to their awareness to the structural forces of their problems and thus, the emphasis on their further self strengthening was related to learning new knowledge and skills, further development of their ability and widened
their exposure and social circle. There was the obvious increase of self efficacy, yet the development of group consciousness, reducing of self blame and assuming personal responsibility may not be obvious at the initial change process. Such as the feeling of unfortunate as being a single parent and the marriage breakdown, the perception of the problem as individual self inadequacy to cope with the family members, etc. Of course the empowerment process is a continual process of growth and change, depending on their further involvement and experiences. But from the change process of the women being interviewed, it is obvious that no matter what initial point of change occurred, the strategies that were employed to empower women determine greatly to the conception of power and empowerment. For those conceiving power as domination, through the experiences to act on fighting to gain power through actions will make women aware of the cause of their powerlessness from class and gender oppression. Similarly, from conceptualizing power as resource, will result in women emphasizing to equip themselves and to further strengthening themselves through capacity building, yet their political awareness on the domination of class and gender will be less.

Obstacles To Their Empowerment

Family pressure and responsibility often restricted women from participating in community activities and create constrains to their choice and space for personal development. Under the gender stereotyped, women are to perform their carers role in the family, as for single parent, the lack of supportive service to relief their caring responsibility also restrict them from fully participating in the empowerment programs. All of the women being interviewed except one who is a single parent with grown up children, felt that they faced pressure from their family members, including their
husbands, children and had to fulfil their housework responsibility before they could go out to participate the activities of the organization. Although the intensity of family pressure varies depending on individual situation, each of them have to find ways to cope with the family responsibility in order they could enjoy their own space for self development and community participation.

This family pressure does not only hinder their involvement in the activities, but also deter their freedom to publicly express their needs and problems. As the woman from Women Workers' Association said, she hesitated to show her face in front of the media because she worried that her husband and family members would give her a lot of pressure. This also reflected that under the male dominant context, the control over women to obstruct her empowerment started from their personal relationship in the family. One can see that "the personal is political", as women's voices are often being suppressed and controlled within the oppressive power relations in the family.

Apart from family pressure, another obstacle to their empowerment is the lack of protection to the workers who participated in social action. As women workers from the Association mentioned, they were afraid to disclose their identity to the media in fear that they would face pressure from their employer and lost their jobs. The existing situation of workers is that they do not have legal protection on this aspect and they have no bargaining power with their employers to protect their job opportunity. Therefore, they would have to hide their face when joining social actions and refused to meet the media face to face. This revealed the dual oppression of women workers face, that apart from the family pressure, they voice were also being suppressed by the control of their employers.
The third obstacle that was mentioned by the women is the organizational construct that hindered their further participation in the organization and to further developed themselves in the decision-making body of the organization. As the Women Workers' Association is the only organization that have women being interviewed in this study who participate in the decision-making level, the executive committee, they felt that there was a lack of opportunities for them to acquire skills and knowledge to fully participate in the committee. There was not enough training support and they felt inadequate to perform their role as executive committee members. In fact, this illustrated to empower women did not only limit to personal and social level, but also on the organizational level and that sufficient support and resources have to be provided to the grassroots women to be in that position of decision-making and leadership, if not, the experiences could be disempowering instead of empowering.

The Impact of Empowerment on Women

Apart from one woman from the trade union who was being interviewed had rather negative feeling of her ability and still felt very inadequate to do much but will still support as an assistant to the work of the trade union, all the women being interviewed in the study expressed positively that they have grown from the experience of participating in the empowerment activities. The activities ranging from social actions to individual growth courses and self help groups. They felt more confident to speak out and to express themselves. From the women subjective feeling toward the empowerment process, the impact is the significant change of feeling more confidence of oneself and acquiring a different perception on the problems they faced. This again
showed that, with respect to domination, women feel powerless in facing oppression as workers (the impact from economic restructuring) and as women (the role as carers, and as single parents), they are able to resist the domination by developing a new perception towards their situation and gain confidence from that redefinition of their problems especially with the collective support from other women and the organizations.

However, the women's perception toward the problem varies from their empowerment experience. For those who involved in support groups and individual growth classes, they remain the perception of the problem on the individual and interpersonal level, such as they felt better when seeing others who were even more unfortunate or making compromise for they learn to see the limitations of the problem. From the response of those participated in social actions and acted on their problems to give voice to their needs and demands, there was obvious change in their redefinition of the problem they faced. They related their situation with the social structure and the political difference in power between them and the authorities, such as the employers, social welfare department and the government. The political awareness was raised and the group consciousness was built for they no longer see their problems as individual failure, but structural problems that all those in that oppressive situation had to get together collectively to act on the problem for change.

One of the key findings from the study is that the common response of the women is the lack of awareness to their gender position in their empowering experience. Most of the women related their problems with the wider social situation and either built on class inequality or the oppression from the government authorities, yet none has mentioned
about gender inequality in relation to the problem that they faced. This is a question to be further explored. The consciousness raising process often being focused or emphasized in the direct “enemy” in the conflict of an issue or the problem, but seldom can the problem being further analyzed or redefined with a gender perspective as a woman issue. Even within the women’s organization and women’s groups, gender awareness raising is often being undermined or being seen as secondary to the women and their empowerment. This may be related to the historical background of the women’s movement in Hong Kong, as the movement was developed on issue-based approach without much integration with the feminists’ theories and gender concern.

Women experiencing the oppression in gender inequality no matter in the social welfare context or in the work situation did not address the problem in the action, or in their empowering activities and in their conscientization process. Even their individual experience in facing the family pressure when involved in social actions were not being taken up as an issue to be discussed. The lack of gender awareness raising in the empowering process of women resulted the lack of solidarity and collective identity amongst women for their common experiences as women, and the issues they faced were not being identified as gender issues.

This strategy without a gender perspective may directly affect the participation of the women and their contribution of their strength to the development of the women’s movement. The inadequate effort on building gender identity and gender awareness raising work and the diversified understanding of the gender issue within the women’s platform, especially at grassroots organizing, may greatly limit the unity of women and the social impact of local women’s movement.
III. The Power Relations between the Empowerer and the Empowered

According to Amy Allen (Allen, 1999), the methodological perspective of analyzing the power relations help us to understand more about the subtle forces that enhance or constrain the empowering process. Allen introduced the foreground perspective and background perspective in analyzing the power relations. Foreground perspective focus on the description of the power relation that exists between individuals or discrete groups of individuals. The background perspective focuses on the complex social relations that ground every particular power relation, the situated context of social relations which constituted the power relationship. The background perspective can be further differentiated into five distinct aspects: subject-positions, cultural meanings, social practices, institutions, and structures.

With the above framework, it is important to examine the power relation between the organizing agents and the women in the empowerment process in order to understand the nature of the empowering relationship, whether it is liberatory or regulatory? empowering or disempowering to the women? The alertness to the power relation in the empowering process allows us to be aware of the role of the organizers, the strategies and organizational construct that may facilitates or discourage the empowerment of the women.
The Foreground Perspective

It is interesting to find out that from the interview with the organizer from the three different organizations, they have different interpretation of their role as the empowerer and the way they related to the women. The organizer from the trade union perceived herself as the role model and leader in relation to the women, because she was setting an example for them to follow. The organizer from the social welfare organization perceived her role as professional social worker, that she would use different roles in different intervention strategies. However, the final control of such roles to perform rested on her professional assessment. Her role is to give professional guidance to the women for their development. As for the organizer in the women organization, she perceived her role as facilitator and helper. The relationship was comparatively ‘equal’, or in ‘partnership’, as the women basically took part in the decision-making body of the organization. However, the organizer also criticized the other organizers who came from grassroots in her organization as being too patronizing, being too overprotective to the women and making decisions on their behalf. This kind of relation created dependency and the power to exercise decisions still rested with the organizers.

As for the women being interviewed, the author observed that most of the women expressed gratitude and gratefulness to the organizer or social worker who “help” them and as a woman expressed, “that the social worker gave me the opportunity to participate in the consultative committee.” The union leaders also being perceived by the women that they had been helping them to gain power and the women admired their contribution and effort. One woman even expressed that one of her gains in her involvement in the trade union was the opportunity to know the union leader who was
a politician and a political figure of the trade union. Most of the organizers were being perceived by the women as authoritative figure, knowledgeable and professional, they are the model of capability and powerful. Except the women from the Women Workers Association who expressed they felt the care and concern as sisters, and the relation was more leveled for they criticized the organization’s strategy of lacking the consolidation of women workers and the lack of opportunity for them to develop and to train up in the executive committee. They also felt intimidated and inadequate in their participation in the executive committee, this also made them undermined their ability.

The power relationship between the empowerer and the empowered can be disempowering if the relation is hierarchial instead of working in partnership. (Baistow, 1995) The elite model or the male leadership model in the trade union and the professional relationship of social workers with the clients created the superior and subordinate relationships which was reflected from the women’s expression of their relationship with their organizer. They defined their role as a learner, inadequate and less knowledgeable when compare to the organizer, and there is the kind of dependency, even the exercising of their ability and power are being seen as “given” to them by the organizer. Situated in a hierarchical relationship, as reflected in the working relationship in the trade union and the welfare organization of Yang Oi Tong, hindered the empowering process of the women especially in the development of their self assertiveness and their identification of the self uniqueness. They are under the shadow of the stereotypical leadership style and if they cannot perform such qualities they would see themselves as less capable and subordinated as a follower role. The power relationship will not be able to breakthrough, for the power of defining the women’s performance is still rest with the organizers. Unless the power relation is transformed,
and that the women resume their self-definition to work in partnership with the organizer and within the organization, empowerment can then be liberating instead of regulating.

Even though the structure of the organization provides opportunities for the women to participate in the decision-making body, if one neglects the awareness of the contextual constrains of the women, who are deprived in knowledge and skills to exercise their power, their participation is still restricted and even create the feeling of inadequacy and powerlessness to the women. This is being reflected in the case of the Women Workers’ Association, for even with the participation in the decision-making body, without the necessary support and arrangement to cater their needs, they still cannot be empowered during the process, contrary, felt disempowering. The power still rested with the organizers and the educated activists in the executive committee.

Background Perspective

The unequal power relations between the organizers and the women described as above is a result of the social relations of the context that they are situated. To analyze the forces that create the power relations, the five aspects namely, subject-positions, cultural meanings, social practices, institutions, and structures will be examined. For subject-positions, the women basically are situated in a ‘helper’ and a ‘being helped’ position when started to involve in the empowering programs. It is understandable that they felt grateful to the organizers for providing the support and services to them. They are already position-determined to be the one that needs help, the receiver of service and resources. This is especially obvious if the women were able to overcome their
problems through the direct service from the organizing agents, such as labor disputes, family problems, or finding of jobs.

As for cultural meanings, the organizers have their titles and these titles are embedded with meanings which related to certain hegemonic definitions, such as social worker meaning educated, professional, and helpful; organizer meaning active, dominant, and coordinating, and resourceful. Thus, the meanings to their titles, no matter how they termed themselves give special hierarchical relation with the women, who are the participants of the activities or the members of the organization. The women who were able to participate in the executive committee of organization may have different meanings to them in the power relation to the organizer, as they were the decision-makers, at least they were able to criticize the performance of the organizer and the organization. However, if they were not able to exercise their power in the committee, they still felt themselves as subordinate.

These cultural meanings of their titles are reflected in the particular social practices. The organizers are to chair the meetings, ( at least at the beginning stage ), to assess their needs in order to provide the necessary intervention strategies, to work with paid salary, to give directions and to provide resources for the women during the empowering process. These practices reinforce the power relation between the organizer as dominant and the women as subordinate. Even these practices can be reversed, but the women still have to learn the model from the organizers. Unless they create their own model of practices that fit into their background.

The institutional context in which subject-positions, cultural meanings and social
practices are embedded, either discourage or reinforce the unequal power relation between the empowerer and the empowered. In this study, the different institutional context – the trade union, government subvented welfare organization and non-subvented women organization have different political perspective and understanding of empowerment which upheld different practices and norms within the organization. The trade union emphasis on leadership practices under their male dominant hierarchical organizational structure, while the welfare organization emphasis on professional practices under the hierarchical service delivery structure. The women organization, although participatory structure, yet still professionals dominate the decision without providing resources and the necessary practices that encourage the participation of grassroots women in the central decision-making level.

In the power relation of the organizer and the women, one may also have to look into the class relation in the social context. That mostly the organizers are with middle class background or thinking and they are with the resources that they can work as organizers. For the grassroots women to be empowered, they have the social constrains from the deprivation of resources and the different practices and norms within their working class culture. During the empowering process, the empowerer determines the rules of the games - the strategies to empower and the qualities of being empowered. This may not fit into the class background of the empowered. For example, the organizer may encourage the women to learn taking minutes and chairing meetings as a way to empower the women, however such practice maybe embedded with their middle class style of writing minutes and chairing meetings. To develop alternative empowering practices which decided and defined by the women themselves is therefore important to transform the power relations between the empowerer and the empowered.
In the final chapter, the alternative conception of power and empowerment, as well as the strategies and practices to empower women will be explored and elaborated.
X. Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, the author would hope to address the several issues within the empowerment discourse that have been reflected in the analysis of the study. The issues that arose from the study are, firstly with the different conception of power either as resource or as domination adopted by the empowering agents create both liberatory and regulatory effect to the grassroots women who were to be empowered through their participation in the activities. (Baistow, 1994/5) With the conception of power as domination, the women became more aware of the class and sex oppression which they felt the need to fight and to act against, but at the same time feeling lack of individual ability and inadequacy to perform as leaders or committee members at the decision-making level within their organizations. Contrary, under the conception of power as resource, those who feel empowered after acquiring more skills and knowledge through training programs and developmental activities, lacks the critical awareness toward class and gender oppression. Empowerment strategies conceiving power as "power over" or as "power to" are caught up in the dilemma of gaining and losing power of the women. This conception of power as possessional may need to be rethought and redefined within the empowerment discourse.

The second issue to be raised in this study is the empowering relationship between the empowerer and the empowered. Although under different individual personality and organisational construct, there are different degree of disempowering effect on the women. The women still perceived themselves as inadequate comparing to the workers and the relation is still hierarchical. There is a need to breakthrough this power relations in the empowering process otherwise the disempowering effect will still be perpetuating.
Maybe an alternative working relationship has to be constructed and a redefinition of the power relation in the empowering process is needed.

The third issue is the lack of gender awareness impacted on the women in the work of empowerment. The women were more critical toward class exploitation than gender inequalities; they were more identified with their social deprivation than sex oppression; they were more antagonistic toward government policy than the patriarchy. Is gender really a secondary agenda to that of class, even within the work to empower women, especially with the grassroots women? Or should we not conceive it as categories to be prioritized but as one unique entity as women workers, women welfare recipients or working class single mothers?

These are the crucial issues to be re-examined within the empowerment work with women and in here the author would hope to address these problems illuminated from the concepts of the post-structural/postmodern theorists, which may shed new insights to the empowerment discourse and the work ahead.

**Issue 1  Domination versus Resource**

Both conceiving power as domination and as resource are modernist liberal and socialist perception on power. Power to them is possessional, to empower therefore is to gain, to seize power so that the powerless can be liberated and became powerful. The gaining of power with different emphasis on different levels – individual, interpersonal and social level is to empower the powerless ranging from liberal to socialist perspective. For the powerless to gain power, who are either under domination
or deprived in social resources are to place the empowerment discourse in a paradoxical situation. Furthermore, this conception of power fails to address the complexity of the power relations which involve both oppositional as well as resource building. As Amy Allen (Allen, 1999) criticized, the one-sidedness of these conceptions of power is problematic for women dominated by men and class, can at the same time have access to and exercise power over other women or men by race, ethnicity, or disability. One can see that women workers also discriminated and stigmatized the new arrivals in Hong Kong for causing social problems such as unemployment, abuse of welfare resources, etc. Also, this one-sided approach renders each conception of power incapable of making sense of the complex and multifarious power relations in which women can both dominated and be resourceful at the same time and in the context of one and the same norm, institution, and practice.

As reflected from this study, the women who are to be empowered through the activities organized by the trade union, women organization and the social welfare organization have different experiences of empowerment under different strategies adopted by the organizations with different conception of power. The trade union and women organization conceiving power as domination and oppositional adopted conflict strategies. Women were conscientized toward class oppression and to gain power by collective action. Yet, at the same time, on an individual level, they played a subordinate position in their organization feeling the lack of skills and ability to perform in decision-making level or to play a leading role. There were also the lack of individual growth programs and awareness raising activities apart from learning through reflection from social action and advocacy work. As for the women in the social welfare organization which conceived power as resource and adopted the individual
enhancement strategy, women were to gain power through learning new skills, mobilizing social resources for more equal opportunities, and social awareness raising. Women were able to strengthen their self efficacy and interpersonal relationship, yet, they have less concern and awareness to the structural inequalities that put them in a deprived situation and would not actively take action to challenge the system.

It seems that either way of conceiving power and empowerment is incomplete, for conceiving power as either domination or as resource would only limit the focus of empowerment work on either challenging the powerful or capacity/resource building. Perhaps, power is more complex than a dichotomous relations or a resource to be possessed. According to Foucault (Foucault, 1982), power is both repressive and productive. It prohibits and produces; it prohibits by producing and produces by prohibiting. So power is not necessarily negative in domination, as Yeatman (Yeatman, 1997) argues, “Domination can be used to control others in order to serve the interests of the powerful, or domination can work democratically to extend or even constitute the powers of its subjects.” One can see that democratic institutions such as the rule of law, freedom of speech and assembly and representative government can be a mechanism of domination serving the powerful, but at the same time, if uses for the interest of the oppressed, can be respecting their rights such as the Domestic Violence Act, the Equal Opportunities Law.

Under this conception of power, empower is no longer just to challenge domination or to building up one’s resource and ability, but in a more complex condition. Power is both repressive and productive, it prohibits by producing and produces by prohibiting. Within the women empowerment context, male power prohibits the women’s choice
and opportunities, and at the same time, produces resistance to strive for their space
while the power produces through collective effort, prohibits the exercising of male
power over the women. So with such a conception of power, empowerment strategies
adopted are to be pluralistic, and contextualised. Power exists in all relations and what
may be empowering in one setting may not be empowering in another. To empower is
to generate power within the power relations and at the same time, to challenge
domination. For example in legislation, it can be prohibiting the freedom of women
through the marital law or can be liberating to women through the equal opportunities
act. This is especially true in the present global mechanism when the oppression is often
diverse and complex, sometimes not having a clear direct enemy in opposition.
Therefore strategies to empower women are necessary to be multifaceted, at individual,
interpersonal and social levels, for challenging the oppression as well as generating
capacity within the power relations to strengthen women.

Issue 2 Rethinking the Empowering Relation

There exists a paradoxical relation between the empowerer and the empowered under
the modernist perspective of viewing power as a possession. As Minow (1985)
illustrates, empowerment can have disempowering functions. Parker (et al.1999)
pointed out the relation within empowerment is embedded with “the dilemma of
difference”. The service providers to provide service to empower the clients, but at the
same time, labelling and stigmatising them through a process which examine an area of
practice, identifying a problem, categorizing them and targeting these people for a
provision of service. This process can be stigmatising which contributive to a
“difference dilemma.” This can be illustrated from the findings of the study that within
the empowerment relation between the empowerer and the empowered, there existed the disempowering effect.

The trade union, the women organization and the social welfare organization aims at empowering the women through different strategies but the result is the women still perceived themselves as subordinate or feeling inadequate to participate in the decision-making body of the organization. The postmodern perspective provides a new angle to redefine the power relations. The power relation is repressive and productive. Power creates resistance. The resistance can generate power. So within the empowerment relationship, there exists resistance from the empowered, but not able to channel and to actualize within the existing construct, such as the trade union leadership, the social work professional expertise and the educated activists. In this study, women who were from the women organization, and at the same time, being as the executive committee members, felt the repressive forces and generated resistance to seek for inputs. They criticized the failing of the organization to provide support to them as grassroots women participating and exercising their power in the decision-making platform of the organization. This empowerment relation is needed to be re-examined, that the process is not to disempower with the name of empowerment.

Under the postmodern approach, clients are not merely consulted, through the use of consultative committee or appointing them in the executive committee, but supply the interpretative framework that is necessary for determining a proper intervention or a successful work strategy. This is truly client-centred intervention. (Pardeck et al. 1994) This client-centredness and contextualization potentially undermine the tradition hierarchy in that status-based or absolute truth claims are subverted and traditional
expertise can be challenged. The ability to create locally appropriate realities becomes possible. Women can then create their own space and culture according to their needs and background to empower themselves. The notion is they are no longer empowered by others, but to empower themselves through these devices.

**Issue 3 Gender Sensitivity**

Feminism is a middle class word in the Hong Kong context. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the women's movement in Hong Kong is lacking a theoretical basis on feminism. This is especially true of grassroots women's organizing work, for feminism means radical and opposition to men which is very threatening and demanding drastic change to women who do not have much choice and resources to live an alternative life. As for the findings of the study, gender concerns were not being picked up or not elaborated by most of the women being interviewed. It seems their awareness of gender problems and sexual inequalities are secondary to that of class and social deprivation. But they did feel the oppression; this was revealed from their account in the obstacles of their involvement in the empowerment programs and activities. They gave concrete and lively examples of their oppression in the family as a wife's role and a mother's role. The restrictions and constrains on them due to their roles limited their participation to challenge the systems and their chances to develop themselves for individual enhancement. Empowerment is not a word or a terminology to be used for theoretical debate, but it is a meaning to the real practice situation. It means something to those who work for the empowerment of women and to the women who participated in the process.
Gender sensitivity is always not being put as priority in the organizing process, because the organizing often means conflictual, and oppositional. It is towards class conflict, either worker and employers, or welfare recipients and government authority. The problem is, when and how can we put the gender problem into the context? What forces are obstructing our awareness and sensitivity?

One can realize from the local context, that feminism as a middle class terminology, is very much rejected by the grassroots culture. Women, according to the postmodern approach, is not a category meaning all women are the same. Women is in diversity, that women have been diverse according to one’s race, class, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, etc. It is not to address women as a category, but to address women in their specified situation or background. If feminism is not a word to be understood by the grassroots within the local context, then, new ways of approaching the gender dimension and awareness are needed, especially in the work of women empowerment.

We cannot live without categories, when we define something, we are categorizing. So the only way to avoid the effects of categorization is to be specific. The specific way to name and to work with the consideration of the gender aspect is to define women in their specific situation. To invent and create new terms and language which fits their culture and their living practices. Women workers, women single parents, women trade unionists and many others can help to redefine ourselves within the gender context. That women's experiences are incorporated into the terminology and that have a different implications to the work and strategies that we are to carried out. Putting women into the context and the their experiences as unique to our understanding is to help us to re-examine our empowerment work whether to work for the women or to
work for our own aspiration.

Empowerment is an easy word to be used as a term to replace enhancement, and an interesting word to show one's being radical against the system, or even for social transformation. However, it is a word to redefine, and to use carefully, not to be abused by those who tend to empower but in the end to disempower the working targets. Women's empowerment is to act against oppression but at the same time, to realise the capacity of the strength that women can empower themselves. Power is repressive as well as it can be productive. The matter is how you conceive it and how you work according to the actual context. To define yourself as the empowerer, the empowerment dilemma has to be resolved before you enter into the discourse. Hopefully, empowerment does not mean to be disempowered.
Appendix I

Interview Guide - For Female Workers

I. Background Information about the female worker
   • Her work history
   • Her family situation
   • Her present living situation

II. Her Involvement in the Organization
   • How did she get involve in the organization?
   • What was her situation at that time?
   • What kinds of activities/programs did she join in?
   • What is her present involvement?

III. Her Empowering Experience
   • How did she feel about joining the organization?
   • What was the change to her before and after involved in the activities/programs?
   • How did she feel about the change?
   • What was the most significant experience that she had in the organization? and Why?
   • Were there any obstacles to her in participating the activities/programs?

IV. Her Relationship with the Organizer
   • How would she describe her relationship with the organizer?
   • What is her feeling toward the organizer?
   • How she perceive her role in the organization?
   • How did she work with the organizer and the organization?
   • Any comments that she would like to improve within the organization and the working relationship with the organizer?

V. Her Gender Awareness
   • How did she perceive the existing status of women in Hong Kong?
   • As women, did she feel that there was gender inequality from her experience?
   • Did she find any difference in terms of working situation between men and women workers?
   • How did she perceive the cause of the problems female workers face?
Interview Guide - *For the Organizers*

I. Background of the Organization
   - History
   - Structure
   - Source of Income
   - Objectives

II. The Work on Empowering Female Workers
   - What kind of strategies they adopted to empower female workers?
   - What were the activities and programs they carried out to empower female workers?
   - What were their aims (both the organization and the organizer) to empower female workers?
   - How did they perceive the cause of the problems female workers face?
   - What they want to achieve through those programs and activities? What they have achieved?
   - Any problems they encountered in their empowering work?
   - What were the changes they perceive to the female workers?

III. The Empowering Relationship
   - How would they perceive their role in the empowering process?
   - How would they perceive their relationship with the female workers?
   - How they work with the female workers in those programs and activities?
   - What did they do to empower the female workers in the relationship?
   - Were there any problems?
## Appendix II

### Interview Summary of the Female Workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Female workers from the Confederation of Trade Unions (CTU)</th>
<th>Ah Lin</th>
<th>Ah Ling</th>
<th>Ah Mei</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td>50</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family situation</strong></td>
<td>Married with children</td>
<td>Married with children</td>
<td>Single, living with parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Work situation</strong></td>
<td>Previously garment factory worker, after restructuring, working as a cook for a trading company</td>
<td>Working as wool clothing factory worker for over 20 years, now cleaning worker in a bakery shop</td>
<td>Garment factory worker, often under-employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Start involve in the organization</strong></td>
<td>Trade union helped her to claim back redundancy compensation; since 1992</td>
<td>Join in protest against the removal of factories to China; since 1991</td>
<td>Join in mass action against the moving of factories to China; since 1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Position in the organization</strong></td>
<td>Executive committee member in one of the trade unions of CTU</td>
<td>Executive committee member in one of the trade unions of CTU</td>
<td>Did not have any official post, but active in participating in the actions organized by CTU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Activities involved</strong></td>
<td>Executive committee meetings, campaigns, protests organized by CTU</td>
<td>Executive committee meetings, campaigns and protests organized by CTU</td>
<td>Campaigns and protest organized by CTU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perception of her change and impact on her after joining the activities</strong></td>
<td>More verbal, more confident and able to make public speech, meeting media. Feel incapable compared to the trade union leaders.</td>
<td>Admire trade union leaders, see herself as follower and incapable due to low education level; raised class consciousness</td>
<td>Know more about labor laws and her rights as workers; more confident to distribute leaflets in the street</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relation with the empowerer, CTU</strong></td>
<td>supporter</td>
<td>follower</td>
<td>Supporter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender awareness</th>
<th>Feel no gender inequality in the trade union, did not join the Women’s Committee</th>
<th>Did not know how to comment on this subject</th>
<th>Both male and female workers experience inequality, not to do with gender difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Female Workers from Hong Kong Women Workers’ Association (HKWWA)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ah Lai</th>
<th>Ah Yee</th>
<th>Ah Chung</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td>42</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family Situation</strong></td>
<td>Single, living with siblings</td>
<td>Married with children</td>
<td>Single, living with siblings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Work Situation</strong></td>
<td>Working as garment factory worker for almost 20 years, affected by economic restructuring, now working as office assistant</td>
<td>Garment factory worker, affected by economic restructuring, now unemployed.</td>
<td>Garment factory worker, affected by economic restructuring, now working as office assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Start Involve in organization</strong></td>
<td>1992 joined unemployed women workers’ group</td>
<td>1992 joined as member, but became more active when she turned unemployed</td>
<td>1992 joined the English class and awareness raising program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Position in organization</strong></td>
<td>Executive committee member</td>
<td>Executive committee member</td>
<td>Executive committee member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Activities Involved</strong></td>
<td>Unemployed women workers’ group, protests and actions for women workers’ rights, seminars and workshops organized by HKWWA</td>
<td>Recreational activities, later she became aware of the need to defend women workers’ rights and started joining in protests and actions</td>
<td>English class, protest and actions for women workers rights, women’s cooperative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Perception of her change and impact on her after joining the activities</strong></td>
<td>More confident and not took down herself. More aware of social issues, more determined to speak out.</td>
<td>Aware of the need to defend women workers’ rights, more sensitive to social issues, more confident about herself. Feel support and togetherness of women workers.</td>
<td>Feel strong and more confident. Raised social consciousness especially on women workers’ problems. Personality became more free and open.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relation with the</strong></td>
<td>Feel inadequate and</td>
<td>Feel guilty for not able to</td>
<td>Feel incapable to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerer, HKWWA</td>
<td>incapable to contribute herself in the executive committee. Criticized the organization for lacking of training to work in the executive committee.</td>
<td>attend executive committee meetings when work night shift. See herself as passive listener in the exco. Meetings.</td>
<td>contribute anything to the executive committee. Comment the organization did not provide training for them to participate in the exco.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender awareness</td>
<td>Identify with the need for a women workers organization. Comment trade union male dominating and hierarchy. Not sensitive to gender inequality in social problems.</td>
<td>Feel the need to have a women workers’ organization and the sisterhood support from women workers. Not sensitive to gender issues.</td>
<td>Feel oppressed by traditional practice, and being a carer in the family. Comment trade unions practice too forceful and without personal care and concern.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Female workers from the Women’s Team in Yang Oi Tong Community Centre**

(YOT)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ah Hing</th>
<th>Ivy</th>
<th>Ah Wai</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Over 40</td>
<td>Over 40</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Situation</td>
<td>Single parent due to divorce</td>
<td>Married with children</td>
<td>Single parent to loss of her husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Situation</td>
<td>Social security recipient, but worked as garment factory worker, but due to single parenthood, need to rely on social security</td>
<td>Housewife due to health problem, cannot work full-time but will seek part-time work</td>
<td>Social security recipient due to single parenthood when the children were young, but presently find a part-time work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start Involve in the organization</td>
<td>Joined the single parents’ support group in 1992</td>
<td>Joined the individual growth class in 1994</td>
<td>Joined the campaign to defend the rights of social security recipient in 1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position in the organization</td>
<td>Member of the Women Service Consultative Committee</td>
<td>member</td>
<td>Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities Involved</td>
<td>Single parents’ support</td>
<td>Individual growth</td>
<td>Single parents’ support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of her change and impact on her after joining the activities</td>
<td>group, women's cooperative</td>
<td>More confident to speak out, more willingness to learn new things and to upkeep herself. But feel unfortunate about her divorce and low self esteem as social security recipient.</td>
<td>More understanding to others feelings, more considerate in interpersonal relationship, more confident in interacting with people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relation with the empowerer, YOT</td>
<td>Helper, and teacher. Feel grateful to the worker for giving her opportunities to learn.</td>
<td>Learner and teacher relationship. Give advice and support</td>
<td>Good friends and good teachers, they know more.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender awareness</td>
<td>Feel more equal than before. Need for individual development and will power to overcome difficulties.</td>
<td>Feel the unequal relationship in the family and with her husband.</td>
<td>Feeling more equal than before, emphasize the importance to develop themselves as women</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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