

# **Rethinking Empowerment: Marginal Groups And Community Work in Hong Kong**

*PingWai LI & HungWong*

*Lecturers*

*Division of Social Studies*

*City University of Hong Kong*

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## **Abstract**

*In this article, Li and Wong suggest that there are three dimensions of empowerment for community work in Hong Kong. The first dimension of empowerment is to enhance ability and awareness of marginal groups. This dimension, which is the most common definition in Hong Kong, has neglected the power relationship within the empowerment process. As to overcome this blind spot, the second dimension of empowerment is to reconsider “power” as a social relationship. The aim of empowerment is to change the unjust power relationship between the dominator and the dominated. Nevertheless, the dominated, who have been empowered, may paradoxically become the new dominator. The new social movement has a critical mind about this “power corrupts” problem, which gives rise to the third dimension of empowerment. For them, empowerment is not just replacing old hegemony with new hegemony, but constructing a new worldl view, in order to create new concept and interpretation of power relationship.*

## **Introduction: Marginal Groups as New Target in Community Work**

In recent years, the development of community work in Hong Kong has a new trend. The “Functional Communities” is more emphasised than the “Geographical Communities” by the social workers. It seems that the special target groups in the community are the main focus in community organization. There are non-government agencies carried out different community projects to demonstrate the strengths of grassroot. For examples, The Caritas organized the labour development works and the women's projects. The deprived elderly people and the single-parent families are being organized by the Tsuen Wan Evangelical Social Services Centre to fight against the unjust government policies. The Kei Oi social service centre started services for the Chinese new migrants in Sham Shui Po district. It is not a surprise that most of the Neighbourhood Level Community Development Projects (NLCDP) are using multi-dimensional strategies to work with the grassroot people.

Throughout the organizing process, many social workers interpret their working targets as the vulnerable, the deprived or the marginal communities. The concept of “Empowerment” becomes the core element to develop community work strategies. Although there are quite a number of projects claimed that they have achieved the aims of “empowerment”(M.K.Ng, 1992; L.P.Chau,1993; Caritas,1994; K.K.Chan,1994; Tam & Ho,1995), few of them could give sufficient analysis on “why” and “how” upon the process of empowerment. It seems that there is still far from an overview of theoretical understanding of “empowerment” among the local community practitioners. Therefore, a new perspective is needed to tackle the issue of “empowerment” in order to construct a new paradigm with relevant rationale and approaches.

In the following sections, we are trying to explain the “empowerment” process, considering the marginal groups and its relationship with the mainstream society. Considering the political orientation of power relations, a three-dimensions model of “empowerment” will be illustrated all along with local experiences.

### **First Dimension of Empowerment: The Marginal Groups Themselves**

Nowadays, the “vulnerable group” usually refers to elderly people, disabled persons, people with chronic illness, unemployed, women and so on. Their powerlessness are reflected by their low level of self-confidence, poor consciousness and ability to cope with their difficulties. The first dimension of empowerment is to focus on the marginal groups themselves. Throughout the process of “empowerment”, the roles of the social worker is to enhance their knowledge, consciousness and ability to overcome their hardships in vulnerable situations. This is the most common interpretation of “empowerment” in Hong Kong.

Ng (1992) describes the practice of “resident empowerment” is an educational process. It is aimed at upgrading the resident’s knowledge, consciousness, and ability in order to enhance their participation in problem-solving. Chan (1994) has a similar approach to define “empowerment”. In broad sense, the vulnerable people can obtain power and strive for their rights through mutual support in improving their living environments. In narrow sense, it can strengthens one’s adaptability, ability, skills and knowledge in order to obtain his or her sense of pride, capability and self-control. However, such definition gives no reasons of “why” and “how” the residents are being disempowered. It only contributes to the ignorance or

misconception of residents to their “disability” (Chan, 1994).

Tam and Ho (1995) define “marginal group” from an aspect of “power relation” that such group of people are controlled by others and lose their rights that they are deserved. They are even denied by the common people in their daily living. In their point of views, the cause of disempowerment is explained by the dynamics of power structure. However, Tam and Ho still interpret the aims of community work are : (1) to strengthen the consciousness of the victims under exploitation and enable them to decide their life styles; (2) to give them enough confidence to strive for their rights by their own efforts. Such interpretation is stressed on the improvement of the marginal group which is similar to the objectives of the first dimension of empowerment.

Power, according to Dahl(1995), is a kind of force that one can make others to do something which he or she is reluctant to do so. “Power” can be illustrated by force or by authority. The former involves violence and the latter implies that the power is being controlled and exercised by the elite group. Yet, the first dimension has neglected the power relationship within the empowerment process. It only interprets power as “ability” rather than “force” or “authority.” The idea of liberation is rather abstract and confusing that it is a process to strengthen one’s ability to release from the burden. In short, the first dimension of empowerment emphasises on enhancement of marginal groups’ ability and consciousness to cope with their difficulties. It has no intention to reform the power relations in the social context.

In Hong Kong, the merit of the first dimension of empowerment is that it is easier for community workers to adopt its rationale. Owing to such rationale is close to the values and approaches of traditional social work practice in our local context, it is a consensus model that no radical confrontation can be seen between the dominator and the dominated. Nevertheless, the first dimension of empowerment also has demerit. The definition of empowerment is similar to the rationale of enhancement. They are both suggesting the ways to strengthen the client’s own ability in adapting to the environment. The role of the social worker is to eliminate those obstacles that hinder the client’s potential. This leads to a question that whether these obstacles are built in by the marginal groups themselves or reflected by the power relations between the marginal groups and the mainstream society.

In short, we argue that the powerlessness of the marginal groups is due to the domination and exploitation of the elite groups in our local context. The elite groups repel the marginal groups from the mainstream society. What so called “marginal” and “mainstream” is just the two sides of a coin. Their relationships can be reflected in the power structure in our society. For the first dimension of empowerment only stresses on the improvement of individual’s ability to react to the reality, it is not a surprise that people demand more and more state support to release their burdens. Unfortunately, the absence of criticism of such imbalance relationships reinforces the distance between the elite groups and the marginal groups in the power structure. Therefore, it is necessary to reconsider “power” as a “social relationship” in order to gain insights of community work strategies.

### **Second Dimension of Empowerment: Reforming Power Relations**

In the second dimension of empowerment, we view the deprived situation of the marginal group from the aspect of “disempowerment”. It means that a certain groups of people are being exploited by the mainstream society. These groups can not protect and enjoy the resources such as reasonable living conditions, equal job opportunity, education and training, and so on. As a result, they are forced to struggle in a marginal position where limited resources and power can be obtained. Therefore, “disempowerment” is the process and result of domination and exploitation in most societies. The aim of empowerment is to change the unjust power relationship between the dominator and dominated.

“Disempowerment” has various aspects and meanings. In economic aspect, it means some people are forced to low-income because of the limited choice to work (e.g., single-parent families). In social aspect, it refers to people who lose their basis living conditions, families, and support network throughout their social life (e.g., the homelessness). In political aspect, “disempowerment” refers to the situation in which general low-income household cannot actively involve in political activities because of their financial burdens. With an absence of back up in grassroot mobilization, they are powerless in facing social problems. Environmental factors are the main cause to their marginal positions. They don't know how to secure their own benefits by means of political actions. All these three aspects contribute to a consequence of “economic vulnerable” and “social powerless” of the marginal groups. This will be further illustrated in the following paragraphs.

In terms of economic aspect, the “disempowerment” of labour explains how they are being marginalized, making them to become “economic vulnerable” and “social powerless”. In Hong Kong, the transformation of industrial structure is a prime cause leading to disempowerment of labour. A great number of manufactory plants are moved to mainland China. The production lines are also delegated to places where manual labours are relatively cheaper. In such circumstance, many local manual labours in manufactory sector become unemployed, especially to those female or middle age workers. Owing that they are limited by their background characteristics such as age, skills, working experiences, etc., it is difficult for them to change a relevant job. As a result, they are forced to obtain temporary or low-paid job which they are unwilling to take. In the job market, the employers further increase their power to exploit the labours. Eventually, the labour becomes one of the marginal groups to suffer from these imbalance power relations.

The raising unemployment rate in Hong Kong reflects the discrimination against middle age people, women, Chinese new migrants, disabled persons, etc. If the situation is getting worsen, these people will become long term unemployed. It is believed that they have no sense of security because of the exploitation. For those who have low-paid job, they would rather tolerate the unjust treatment and keep silent to save their jobs. In turn, the labour has little power to change their “marginal ”position in the labour market. They remain in “vulnerable situation” from time to time.

The trends of unemployment rate and decreasing wages of labour have not yet gained serious concern by the Hong Kong government. The current situation is commented as a normal adjustment of the labour market under the transformation period. The state responsibility to the solution of unemployment is to introduce a retraining scheme for those in needed. Such government’s policy is to enhance the skills, consciousness, and information exchange of the unemployed labours. It does not concern the “imbalance power” within the labour market.

On the contrast, the labour unions urge the government to terminate the “imported labour” policy as a major solution to the unemployment problem. In fact, the “imported labour” policy creates greater power for the employers to exploit the local labour with lower wages and unfavourable working environment. The labour unions strongly fight against such policy in order to avoid the growing imbalance

power relation in the labour market.

The action approach of the labour unions is a typical example of the second dimension of empowerment. It is aimed at reforming the power relations by means of terminating the “imported labour” policy. The labours are organized to form a collective power to represent their rights and negotiate with their opposite parties. This is quite different from the first dimension of empowerment which only focused on the enhancement of worker’s ability, consciousness and information exchange. The impact of the second dimension of empowerment is more solid and influential than that of the first dimension.

In brief, the second dimension of empowerment is to analyse power dynamics of the dominator and dominated on the political basis. Within a highly stratified social structure, the classes, gender, ethnic groups, etc. are all important factors to shape up the power dynamics. Justice is the guiding principle for the community workers and the marginal groups to stress on and struggle for their benefits. “Social action” and “policy advocacy” are the major strategies and tactics in illustrating the second dimension of empowerment.

In Hong Kong, most of the recent practice and discussions on “empowerment” are relied on the first dimension than the second. In the early 80s, many community development teams helped people to set up resident organizations in developing grassroot movement. While the government policies became more open in the mid 80s, these resident organizations strived for more power and resources. They began to participate in various levels of election within the political structure (e.g., the District Board, the Urban Council, the Regional Council, Legislative Council).

Throughout this process, the grassroot leaders gradually build up their power status. Some of them become as politicians in different political parties. This makes the dynamics of the political parties, resident organizations, and the grassroot people more complex. It is not a surprise that some of these politicians are taking advantages of the grassroot issues such as housing, welfare service, social security, etc. to achieve their political end. Therefore, they are neglected by their supporters because of their short-sighted and lack of profound political belief.

As a result, the grassroot people , especially the marginal groups have to create new form of power, using new forms of action to voice out their discontent. They emphasize that the action should be focused on the participants themselves. They have their own rights to express their grievances according to their true emotions and willingness. This creates debate on “new social action” and “civic society” in Hong Kong. Does it imply that to exchange the roles between “marginal groups” and “elite groups” can alter the unreasonable power relations? Also, does it mean that to eliminate the nature of “class society” is to reverse the power positions? History tells us that “power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely”. It seems that it is meaningless to replace the old autocracy with a new one. In the coming section, we are going to suggest the third dimension of empowerment which may contribute insights to these questions.

### **Third Dimension of Empowerment: Constructing a World View & Value Orientation**

The respective situations of last section are the blind spot of the second dimension of empowerment. Changing the roles in power structure does not mean to set up a new power relationship. The second dimension of empowerment aims at strengthening the weak. But once the weak has equipped power, it does not mean that they will no longer exploit those even weaker than they are. Decades ago, the Nazism supporters were the dominated German workers. But today those advocate the Neo Nazism are the unemployed young workers in European countries. When these “vulnerable groups“ encounter their own problems, they easily blame on other groups that are more deprived and marginalizes by the mainstream society. As a result, “Xenophobia” becomes a common and influential ideology among the “vulnerable groups”.

Hong Kong has a similar situation. Let us take a look of a few examples. Firstly, the grassroot people have negative attitude towards the Vietnamese boat people and the Chinese new migrants. Secondly, people who oppose the government to increase the public assistance (CSSA) are mostly come from the low-income families which they are barely excluded from the requirements of CSSA. What will be the response of community workers to this ironic circumstance? This question leads to the third dimension of empowerment: how to construct a new world view and

value orientation to view power relations.

Today, one of the crucial reflections of the new social movement (e.g., feminism, green movement, anti-nuclear movement, etc.) is that “the end can not justify the means”. To build up a just society, the means should exclude all possibility of domination and exploitation. Furthermore, the objective of the new social movement is not to regain the power or replace a new autocracy with an old one but to construct a new power relation based on a new world view and value orientation.

From the views of feminism, a new society is in a belief of eliminating the stratification and exploitation. In such society, the different social classes and gender are relying on one another. Feminism believes that the society has already accepted the idea of “domination” and “competition”. Such concepts are used in patriarchal society to justify its values of “authority”. “Feminism” is misinterpreted as an ambition to create women's liberation that would overturn men's domination (Mies, 1986; Walby, 1986).

The green movement emphasizes the reflection of each people's own lifestyle. With the respect to the universe, human being should accept that there are constraints in our earth. Men should not be greedy to pursue their wealth and satisfaction endlessly. The green movement respects all kinds of living creatures, warning us not to exploit the natural environment. Otherwise, the earth will be no longer our virgin land to live on happily. In other words, the green movement stresses on the spirit of “equality” in society. Only when equal power relation is established, it can overturn the exploitation of human kinds in the society. (Meadows, 1992)

Based on the new interpretation of power, the feminism and the green movement urge for a just and non-dominated relationships between individuals and organizations, and among organizations. They also emphasize that each organization should have its own autonomy. Individuals should reflect on and participate in the organization. To form various kinds of community group is to encourage direct participation of the grassroot people. Such kind of network can be extended and functioned locally or nationally. Therefore, a global perspective on networking is a must to overview the information exchange, mutual support, and action coordination, etc.

In Hong Kong, there is little debate on the third dimension of empowerment. The feminist community work is only in an initial and exploratory base. Without any serious reflections on the issue, the community work is losing its vision and mission gradually. What we need is to equip ourselves a new world view and value orientation to revive the community work. It is especially important to arouse in-depth discussions on the third dimension of “empowerment” with a new understanding and interpretation of power relation.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, the local community work is far to achieve “empowerment” in its practice. We have suggested a theoretical framework of three dimensions of “empowerment”. The first dimension is to enhancing the marginal group’s ability to improve their situations. The second dimension is to changing the power relation in hope that there will be a new standpoint for community work in local context. Concerning the second and the third dimension, we argue that only a new world view and value orientation can become a solution to revive the local community work. All these three dimensions are not mutually excluded, they have similarities and duplication. For example, all three dimensions suggest enhancing marginal group’s awareness and consciousness. Through the above discussion, we intend to prove that they are neither a simple denial nor would they return to the very beginning of the circle.

Lastly, we believe that “marginal group” is the major target in community work. The community worker should take into consideration of this “three dimensions model of empowerment” throughout the intervention process. As we have noted that these three dimensions are not mutually excluded, the concept of “empowerment” is interpreted in different meanings according to different dimensions. When we empower the marginal groups, we should enhance their abilities, confidence and awareness to cope with their difficulties. Also, we should eliminate the domination and exploitation upon the marginal groups by the mainstream society. Yet, the marginal groups should reflect their views on power relations. They should not endure other marginal groups. Instead, they should form a united-front in order to bridging up different groups, resident organizations and community agencies to fight for their own rights and benefits. As a result, it is hoped that the community work

can become an authentic social movement.

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