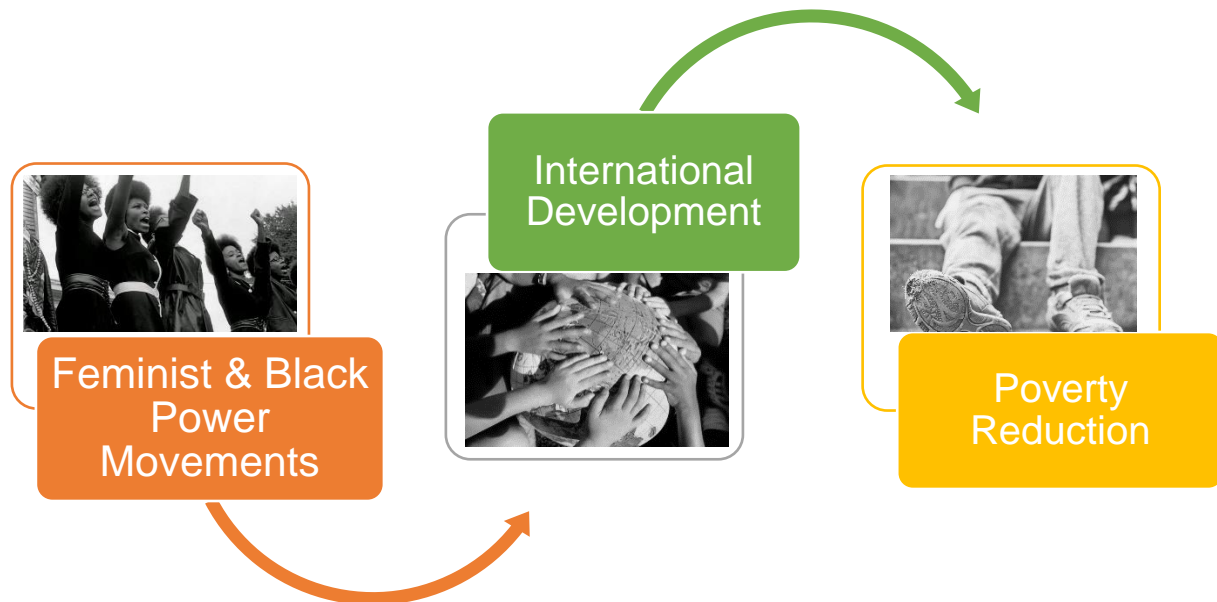


# Roots of Empowerment

“Empowerment refers to principles, such as the ability of individuals and groups to act in order to ensure their own well-being or their right to participate in decision-making that concerns them.”

Anne-Emmanuèle Calvès



The concept of empowerment has origins in the feminist and Black Power movements of the mid-20th century. Empowerment was later adopted by international development efforts as a strategy to improve the well-being of women and girls in developing countries through the transformation of oppressive economic, political, legal, and social structures. The focus was not on individual economic independence, but on strengthening and reinforcing women’s power. Towards the end of the century, empowerment was embraced by anti-poverty programs as a means to increasing an individual’s freedom of choice and opportunity. This shift towards an anti-poverty framework helped create a link between economic empowerment and individual self-sufficiency.

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**Self-sufficiency** in the United States has origins in social policies starting with the Social Security Act of 1935 and became the focal point of welfare reform in the 1980/90s. “Self-sufficiency,” grew from the interest of moving individuals and families off welfare. While this is a widely used term in many workforce development and social service programs, it erodes the importance of community and collective responsibility - especially when these systems do not successfully meet the needs of the diverse communities they serve. No person is truly self-sufficient - we all rely on community resources, services, and systems. Therefore, self-sufficiency can be harmfully rooted in racist, ableist, and sexist policies that exclude large groups within our community such as people of color, women, LGBTQIA+, and persons with disabilities who are often disregarded in traditional economic empowerment programs.

As “empowerment” language was adopted by various movements, the concept of empowerment shifted towards building individual power rather than ensuring collective power. In doing so, programs began to focus on the obstacles individuals encounter in becoming economically independent rather than addressing the systems and conditions that created economic inequities in the first place. Moreover, this focus can harmfully shift the blame to individuals for their circumstances due to a lack of skills and resources rather than the social structures that disproportionately exclude gender-minorities, people of color, LGBTQIA+, and individuals with disabilities. This individualized approach fails to address the structures of violence and oppression that are at the core of economic inequality. It is the difference between giving someone the power and removing the obstacles that diminished their power in the first place.



True “empowerment” requires that we transform the political, economic, and social structures that have created inequality.

## Our Framework and Philosophy

An empowerment model that **centers transformational systems change** reinforces efforts to support individual power. This recognizes that systemic oppression and violence has robbed specific communities of that power, necessitating repair that must be done on the institutional level to help restore individual power.

### Systems

**Policy** (centering equity and justice)

**Practice** (anti-oppression)

**Culture** (person-centered, trauma-responsive)

Structures built on inclusion, equity, and justice to ensure equal power for all.

### Individual

**Skills** (financial literacy, job training, etc)

**Resources** (basic needs and money)

**Community** (systems of support)

Strategies to build individual power by helping to repair harm that may have resulted from a lack of power, exclusionary practices, or economic abuse.

While individual repair may also be needed for those who have been harmed, systems change addresses the root of the problem and is necessary to prevent harm from the start. Without systems change, individuals will continue to encounter the obstacles that contributed to their disenfranchisement. Prevention and intervention must strategically include addressing the roots of oppression itself in addition to providing individuals with customized support and equal opportunity to effectively promote individual freedom.

