Collective empowerment: A comparative study of community work in Mumbai and Stockholm

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Mumbai and Stockholm are worlds apart in terms of public services, infrastructures and standard of living. However, both cities have known common problems related to social exclusion and marginalisation related to neo-liberal globalisation. Social workers are facing similar challenges regarding collective empowerment as a strategy for community work. This comparative study explored how collective empowerment is undertaken by community workers. The research participants were 13 informants from community-work organisations in the two settings. Semi-structured interviews were used and were analysed with the help of Atlas-ti 6.2 (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH D-10623 Berlin Germany). Social work in Mumbai is in a context of extreme poverty and mainly within the informal sector, whereas in Stockholm most social work is done in relation to a public welfare model. In Stockholm, interventions are aimed towards strengthening social networks, without direct aim at social change. In Mumbai, community workers organise people for collective empowerment to strengthen marginalised groups and achieve social change.

Mumbai in India and Stockholm in Sweden are usually considered as being worlds apart in terms of organisation of public services, infrastructures and standard of living of the majority of its inhabitants. However, both cities have known common problems related to social exclusion and marginalisation of vulnerable groups within communities, partly as a consequence of intra- and inter-country migration resulting from globalisation. Within this neoliberal context, social workers in both contexts are facing similar challenges regarding collective empowerment as a strategy for community work. The present comparative study explored how collective empowerment was being undertaken by community workers within these two urban settings. The research participants for the study were 13 key informants from community-work organisations operating in these two settings. Semi-structured interviews were used for collecting the data which were analysed with help of Atlas-ti 6.2, using critical discourse analysis method. The findings are that similar conditions exist for collective empowerment in both settings; however, there are certain differences in the strategies for empowerment in Mumbai and Stockholm. Social work in Mumbai is conducted in a context of extreme poverty and most of the work is within the informal welfare sector, whereas in Stockholm most social work is being done within or in relation to a public welfare model. Moreover, in Stockholm interventions are aimed towards strengthening social networks, but there seems to be no direct aim of collective empowerment aiming towards social change. In Mumbai, a key aspect of community work is organising people for collective empowerment to strengthen the power of marginalised groups and to achieve social change.

Most big cities around the world like Mumbai and Stockholm have known social exclusion and marginalisation of vulnerable groups within the communities, creating areas of advanced marginality resulting from neoliberal globalisation (United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 2013; Wacquant, 2008). The postmodern understanding of our global world is therefore posing some critical challenges for social work in terms of how to forge new concepts of responsibilities and to design appropriate interventions both at global and local levels in order to respond to communities that are being marginalised (Fook, 2002). Within such a context, an important aspect for critical social work
discourse is related to the analysis of collective empowerment within community work.

Social workers from all around the world engage in working towards social change through empowerment interventions for the liberation of people, with the prime objective of enhancing well-being (International Association of Schools of Social Work [IASSW], 2014). One of the prime foci of social workers is trying to meet common human needs, including particularly the needs of vulnerable and oppressed people, for social justice with an ideal that all members of a society are to have the same basic rights, protection, opportunities, obligations and social benefits (Barker, 2003; Hare, 2004). In particular, community, seen as a group of people based on geography, needs and concerns, and having a collective identity, has always been a core group within social work practice. Midgley and Adler (1978) stated that community work is one of the primary methods of social work intervention. Community work includes social work practice such as community organisation, community mobilisation, empowerment and development, and collective social planning (Pippard & Bjorklund, 2004). In community work, professional social workers work together with other organised actors in the community (Twelvetrees, 2008). In particular, community work focusing on marginalised groups and communities as collectives has therefore always been an important part of the social work. However, with the neoliberal forces of globalisation, an international trend towards individualisation of social work can also be observed in many countries (Briskman, Pease, & Allan, 2009). As Herz and Johansson (2011, p. 30) put it: ‘Modern social work, however, may arguably be seen as having departed from analysing structural elements and moved towards more individualised elements’.

Within this particular context, a comparative research was conducted to study collective empowerment tasks being undertaken by community work within two urban settings – Mumbai and Stockholm. In Mumbai, the study focused on the area called M–Ward East (MWE). The MWE, which has the lowest Human Development Index of Mumbai (0.2), is located in the north-eastern edge of the city, with a population of about a million people and an estimation of 77 per cent of them living in slums (Municipal Corporation of Greater Maharashtra, 2010). In Stockholm, the study focused on the region of Tensta, which is located within the district of Spånga-Tensta borough. Tensta has approximately 18,045 inhabitants, 86.5 per cent of whom come from foreign backgrounds, 45 per cent of them coming from Asia and 36 per cent from Africa, and approximately 9 per cent from Europe excluding Scandinavia (Stockholms stad, 2013) Tensta is one of six suburbs clustered together in the area called Järvaället. The area has been in focus in Swedish media after a series of car burns and riots that took place in May 2013.1

Conceptual and theoretical framework

Critical social work

Healy (2005) argued that social workers were engaged in critical social work practice long before 1960s, when critical social work theories gained popularity. For Fook (2002), critical perspectives within social work discourses can be traced from reviewing early radical critique based on Marxist, feminist and structural analyses, and through postmodern perspectives. In fact, critical theory does not imply a unified theoretical perspective (Briskman et al., 2009), and therefore it encompasses a variety of perspectives including: Marxist social work, radical social work, structural social work, feminist social work, anti-racist social work, and anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory social work (Ferguson, Jones, & Cooper, 2008; Healy, 2005).

However, two central concepts that could possibly unify different critical social work perspectives are empowerment and social justice. Healy (2001) argued that the core mission of critical social work is to promote social justice through empowering people. For Mullaly (2010), social justice is seen as an empowering concept because it includes the conditions necessary for the development and exercise of capacities for maintaining and enhancing human functioning. DuBois and Miley (2011, p. 22) opined: ‘If empowerment is the heart of social work, then social justice is its soul’. Gutierrez, Maye, and DeLois (1995, p. 249) stated: ‘Empowerment is the process of increasing personal, interpersonal or political power so that individuals, families, and communities can take action to improve their situations’. DuBois and Miley (2011) argued that when people experience empowerment, they feel effective, conclude that they are competent, and perceive that they have power and control over the course of their lives. The theoretical conceptualisation of collective empowerment has been influenced by the work of Paulo Freire (1971) – Pedagogy of the Oppressed – where the focus has been on conscientising and social mobilisation for justice, rights and freedom of the oppressed groups (Askheim, 2003). Such a perspective is related to what Payne (2005) characterised as the socialist/collectivist approaches to empowerment. However, there is also an empowerment perspective with very strong focus on the individual, drawing on the tradition of charity and self-help. In the 1980s, this individualised empowerment perspective grew strong, influenced

1 For readers in Scandinavia, see the nationwide morning newspaper, Dagens Nyheter, 20–29 May 2013.
by neoliberal trends with strong emphasis on self-help and individual responsibilities of the so-called customers (Adams, 2008). In such a perspective, the focus is not on community work and social change of unequal and oppressing power structures.

To have a better understanding of the concept of collective empowerment, one has to examine the concepts of power and powerlessness (Moscovitch & Drover, 1981). For Fook (2002), power is something that people create and use, which can be both repressive and productive. When power is used in a repressive way by dominant groups from the society, a state of powerlessness is created, with a feeling of being stuck, helpless or victimised (Tew, 2006). It creates conditions of oppression by the dominant group and demands for social justice in favour of those being marginalised, victimised or exploited. A broad conceptualisation of social justice in critical social work includes, at least, freedom from five important aspects, namely oppression/exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence (Young, 1990). In its broad sense, social work for social justice can be seen as having three important dimensions: distributive justice, including the distribution of power, rights, as well as benefits and burdens; recognitional justice, including freedom from cultural domination and recognition and respect for human dignity, and a sense of worth and self-esteem; and finally, associational justice, including democracy and fairness in the rules and processes to act and react collectively (Gewirtz, 2006).

Methodology

This study was carried out within the frame of a joint research project between researchers from Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai, India, and University of Gävle, Sweden. It emanated from a shared view that there seems to be a growing need for collective empowerment and community work in social work today, and that a comparative analysis could contribute to a better understanding of the conditions for contemporary social work strategies and methods. The approach was then to identify and select socially excluded urban settings in Mumbai and Stockholm, and after that identify community-work actors operating in these specific neighbourhoods. Two research settings: (i) M-Ward East (MWE) in Mumbai, India; and (ii) Tensta in Stockholm, Sweden, were used for data collection. To make a comparative analysis, the same methods and data collection were carried through in the two communities. Field visits with participatory observation were undertaken to get to know the neighbourhoods. Key organisational actors who were undertaking community work in the respective neighbourhoods were identified. The research participants for this study were 13 key informants related to three organisations (Apnalya and Pragatik in MWE and Tensta Träff in Stockholm; see the Appendix). In all three organisations, professional social workers, mainly on the level of director/manager/coordinator, were working along with other community workers, for example, semi-skilled para-professionals and voluntary workers. A semi-structured interview questionnaire was used for collecting the data, during the period February 2011–September 2013. Interviews were conducted on three levels: directors/managers, key functionaries/ coordinators and grass root/street-level workers, to get different views and perspectives from within the organisations in Mumbai and Stockholm.

The gathered data from a total of 15 interviews (of which two were follow-up interviews with directors), eight from MWE and seven from Tensta, were analysed with the help of Atlas-ti 6.2 – computer-aided software – using the method of critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA emerged as an approach within the broad social constructivist orientation to knowledge which focuses on discourse as a way of studying, explaining, and understanding social issues and problems. In the present study, the discourses used by the community workers from Mumbai and Stockholm were subjected to analysis. Using the informants’ discourses from the two different community contexts, the aims of the analysis were to produce interpretations and explanations of areas of social life which identify the causes of injustices and inequalities, and to produce relevant knowledge for correcting such ‘social wrongs’ (Fairclough, 2010). In particular, critical discourse analysis was used in this study as a critical assessment of the social work interventions that are undertaken in the interest of the victims and of resistance to illegitimate domination (van Dijk, 2008).

The research process started from a tentative theoretical understanding of the field of community work and empowerment related to critical social work theory. The relevance of this theoretical frame was based on previous experiences and knowledge of the community field. After discussions within the research team, a semi-structured interview questionnaire was elaborated. A conscious ambition was to avoid theoretically based questions, but rather to have as neutral questions as possible regarding how the informants perceived the conditions for community work and the kind of strategies and interventions they were using. After completed data collection, the conceptual and theoretical framework was elaborated. The empirical interview data were then analysed with the help of Atlas-ti. Themes were identified based on the concrete experiences the community workers expressed, and were interpreted and analysed using the theoretical framework.

Although emanating from a tentative theoretical understanding of the field of study, an abductive
method was then used in the content analysis process. Abductive reasoning is based on a pragmatic approach that allows reasoning to move back and forth between theories and empirical evidence (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Feilzer, 2010; Morgan, 2007). After a first analysis using Atlas-ti to identify themes, a second round of analysis through critical reflexivity and abductive reasoning was undertaken to go deeper into the interpretation and analysis of the gathered materials.

Findings and discussion

Collective empowerment: conditions

From the gathered discourses of the research participants, three intersecting conditions for collective empowerment were identified and analysed. These conditions are migration, the lack of collective identity and the failure of public welfare system.

Migration. Both MWE in Mumbai and Tensta in Stockholm consist of communities with a high proportion of immigrants. In MWE, many immigrants come from various rural parts of India and neighbouring countries in search of a job and better opportunities. Many of the new immigrants have no other alternative than to live in the most backward slum areas of the mega-city. As the director of Apnalaya put it: New migrants are extremely poor; they cannot even dream of renting a shack in the community, as the rates are high. Most of the newly arrived immigrants settle down in the rag picker community and struggle to attain socio-economic mobility.

In Tensta, there are no slum areas, and the population consists mainly of immigrants from outside Sweden. According to a community-work coordinator, Tensta is ‘a place where people are coming from all over the world’. The community-work organisations therefore work with many immigrants who have escaped from war and conflicts.

In both contexts, collective empowerment therefore takes place under conditions for enhancement of the capacity for social mobility of the vulnerable populations. The community-work organisations, in both MWE and Tensta, were engaged in collective empowerment programmes under conditions that require meeting the needs of the new immigrants, mostly in terms of education, health, security and asserting human rights. Another important aspect is how dynamic both communities – MWE and Tensta – are. For instance, informants in both MWE and Tensta described their communities as places where immigrants first settle down, but then move out as soon as they get opportunities for socio-economic mobility. The Director of Apnalaya reported: New migrants come and become steadier and move to other areas.

Similarly, a coordinator in Tensta described exactly the same process:

You move to Tensta, and then maybe you stay here, and your kids are doing well in school, and maybe you got a job for yourself and maybe for your wife or husband, and then you got some money, and then you think, maybe we should move to another place where our kids can meet like native Swedes. So that’s a typical journey . . . In this area we have this, moving in and moving out . . .

In Tensta, immigrants coming from other countries experience risks especially in terms of unemployment or low-paid job, and in receiving such services as for social protection, health, education, employment and housing in the right time (Bask, 2005; Hjerm, 2004). In MWE, immigrants from the rural areas face similar kinds of challenges. However, in MWE, the intensity and degree of problems are relatively greater than in Tensta. In addition, health, sanitation and access to basic education for the immigrants are the highest priority in MWE. Immigrants in MWE and Tensta were therefore seen as being vulnerable groups by the community-work organisations interviewed in this study. Thus, the need for support and protections for such populations required social workers to adopt strategies for collective empowerment.

From a critical theory perspective, the conditions in MWE and Tensta are an example of how globalisation creates systematic conditions for migration by power relations assumed on an increasingly global scope (El-Ojeili & Hayden, 2006). In particular, migration (both intra- and inter-country) is one of the dramatic socio-economic indicators of the neoliberal thrust of globalisation (Healy, 2008). The neoliberal power of globalisation is creating more disparities between regions within and between countries by having, on the one hand, industrialisation, modern sectors, higher productivity, more opportunities for employment and services, as well as higher wage rates; and on the other hand, various sorts of instability, low labour productivity, low income, and fewer opportunities for employment and services (Hu, 2002; Pandey, 2011). The negative side of this process is resulting in growing areas of advanced marginality (Wacquant, 2008). Thus, people are often forced to look for better opportunities and become subjected to other forms of vulnerabilities such as exploitation and marginalisation (Eriksson-Sjöö, Cederberg, Östman, & Ekblad, 2012; Munck, 2008).

Lack of collective identity. A common experience among informants from MWE and Tensta was that people in their respective neighbourhoods experience a feeling of not being part of the established society. In other words, people living in MWE and Tensta lack
a feeling of collective identity. Collective identity is a multidimensional, contested and concept and often ambiguously defined (Eder, 2009; Opp, 2012). It has been used by several theorists and researchers to study different phenomena relating to various groups (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004). The concept is often defined in terms of the socio-politico-economic affective connection that one has as member of a broader group (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). This article relies on a broad conceptualisation of collective identity that is linked to the identification of individuals and/or small groups of individuals with broader communities for the purpose of nation-building and for having an inclusive society.

The informants in MWE and Tensta expressed many common experiences with regard to collective identity. They all described their contexts, both in Tensta and MWE, as communities having unequal living conditions, high rates of unemployment and multiple social problems. In particular, unemployment was considered to be one of the major problems in Tensta. A key informant from Tensta reported:

*The biggest problem is unemployment, and dependency on subsidies. Around a fourth of all families have for some time during the year had social subsidies . . . 50 per cent of the population is not in the workforce.*

In the MWE slum areas, people have come from deprived rural localities to find a daily livelihood in the mega-city. They earn their daily bread from various forms of unskilled labour and many of them find their livelihood from the garbage disposal ground, for example, as rag pickers. The director of Apnalaya stated that the rag pickers . . . people living in slums largely work as daily wage labourers or work on their own and therefore don’t have a sense of common (collective) identity. In addition, she also described the situation in Deonar where the middle class, which used to be the link between the rich upper class and the poor lower class, is no longer in existence because of globalisation which is polarising the society into two very distinct classes where the slum people are becoming further marginalised. Furthermore, as the director of Apnalaya put it:

*People come from different regions, have differences in language, occupations and it is extremely difficult to organise them as they have never been part of a union or committee, they lack a common identity-based on occupation. They have lost the zeal to do something together.*

And, the coordinator from Pragatik stated:

*Earlier it was easy to organise people . . . They were already a part of an organised body; for example, the coolies were a part of the union or the stone cutters also were a part of the stone cutters association, and had an idea of common rights and identity, but the people living in slums largely work as daily wage labourers or work on their own and therefore don’t have sense of common identity.*

Within the frame of the Swedish welfare model, where full employment used to be a cornerstone, unemployment is in itself stigmatising. It is one of the most important aspects of marginalisation and social exclusion in Tensta. In particular, immigrants and their descendants from regions such as Tensta are most likely to be unemployed or subject to discrimination in the Swedish labour market (Englund, 2002; Harbo, 2011). Long-time unemployment creates further marginalisation by threatening people’s social identity, and thus contributes towards a lack of collective identity in society (Schöb, 2012).

From a critical social work perspective, it has been argued that the process of globalisation is the dissolving of collectivity, creating a much more individualised society (Fook, 2002; Stepney & Popple, 2008). This was described as a problem by both social workers in MWE and Tensta. Before, there existed collectivities that social workers could address, for example class-based organisations such as trade unions. Nowadays, social workers first have to contribute to building up such collectivities and start to identify common issues that unify such communities. In addition, it has been argued that individualism has become the social structure of contemporary Swedish society, where individualism is being promoted through the guidelines and rules set by the labour market, the welfare state and the educational system (Wehner & Abrahamson, 2004). This means that a basis for starting processes of collective empowerment is lacking. From a critical social work perspective, one of the key roles for social workers is, and should be, to promote the strengthening of collective identity to contribute to collective empowerment and social mobilisation (Dominelli, 2002; Fook, 2002; Healy, 2001; Stepney & Popple, 2008).

Failure of the public welfare system. The public welfare system in India is said to be ‘dual’ in nature, where only a very small minority of formal sector workers (7% of the total labour force) is covered by the government-run social security systems. Furthermore, the vast majority of informal sector workers (93% of the labour force) have very basic minimum access to such governmental social protection schemes (Pedicini, 2011). In Mumbai, most of the social work organisations therefore operate within the informal welfare sector in a context of extreme poverty and with a minimum of basic facilities at their disposal. It is in
such a situation that social work organisations focus on the conditions for meeting the basic social needs and social rights of the people through community mobilisation for community empowerment. For instance, a grass-root worker from Apnalaya described the lack of basic infrastructure and the lack of support from the public Bombay Municipal Corporation (BMC) in what they are doing for the community:

Shivaji Nagar has no facilities of water, health, education. The BMC has failed to fulfil the above stated basic needs. The organisation [Apnalaya] conducts meetings with the people and the CBOs and according to the needs of the people problem is identified and then they work along with the people to solve it.

In contrast, the ‘ideal universal’ Swedish welfare regime, as described by Esping-Andersen (1990), has been characterised mainly by the social democratic welfare ideology, aimed at equal living conditions and an average living standard for the whole population in Sweden. However, the Swedish public welfare system is in a process of transformation (Sandberg, 2013). It has been reported that most of the public welfare programmes in Sweden are not targeted to the poor; instead, many of the major components of the Swedish system are being targeted to the middle class to varying degrees (Bergh, 2004). The universality of the model is decreasing. The process of such changes within the Swedish welfare system affects various sectors of the welfare policy, for example migration policy, labour market policy, access to the welfare services and level of social benefits. Thus, social work organisations in Stockholm are operating under conditions of a transitional public welfare system. In this context, the discourse used by a coordinator for community work in Tensta reads as follows:

You need to work and pay tax to have this welfare system. . . The government at the moment are decreasing the social benefits, slowly, they have their idea if you don’t get that much money, if you’re unemployed or so, then you will get better motivation.

If social policy in Sweden continues to drift in a different direction than the universal model, it affects the conditions for social work and might restrict the autonomy of social workers. When the public sector suffers from cutbacks and resources to public social services are shrinking, it is relevant to raise the classical question: Are social workers mainly representatives of the contemporary social policy and the public sector governed by the politicians, or do they mainly represent the interests of the clients, users, marginalised and excluded groups? From a critical social work perspective, the professional role of social workers should always be to act in the interest of the people in need, and that might mean to challenge the predominant social policy and power structures (Dominelli, 2002; Mullaly, 2010; Pease, 2002).

In the Indian context, with a very weak public sector and weak structures of social work, the need for and the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs) are much stronger than in the Swedish context. As we have seen above, the informants in Mumbai also talked about the withdrawal of public social services in marginalised communities. This is interpreted as an outcome related to processes of neoliberal globalisation.

Although there are noticeable differences between the community work in Mumbai and Stockholm, a common experience expressed by the informants from both Tensta and MWE is that the role of the public sector is shrinking within both contexts. This can be understood in relation to the ongoing process of neoliberal globalisation. This process has a strong impact on the public welfare services and sectors for countries across the globe (Fook, 2002; Stepney & Popple, 2008). In particular, neoliberal globalisation with fierce economic competition reduces governments’ abilities to provide welfare to their citizens and renders governments more accountable to external economic agents than to citizens (Mosley, 2005). Governments, as in India and Sweden, are therefore facing pressure to move to a mixed economy of welfare, with the market taking more shares than the state in service provision to the people in the community (Stepney & Popple, 2008). Neoliberal globalisation creates fear and concern for further marginalisation and oppression of the vulnerable groups among community-work organisations. Many organisations confront, resist and challenge the oppressive impact of neoliberal globalisation on the public welfare systems by creating environments for collective empowerment. Social workers are trained and have the required skills for collective empowerment and community mobilisation to protect vulnerable groups from the predations of the market (Dominelli, 2012). Using critical theory, social workers become more concerned with addressing the forms of systematic exclusion associated with global powers (El-Ojeili & Hayden, 2006).

Oppression. In communities where a relatively high level of social inequalities prevails, such as MWE and Tensta, the risk that marginalised groups will suffer further from oppression is always high. Oppression occurs when power is centralised in societies by politically, economically, socially and culturally powerful groups, and results in unjust conditions and circumstances for the subordinate groups (Mullaly, 2010). Barker (2003, pp. 306–307) defined oppression as:
The social act of placing severe restrictions on an individual, group or institution. Typically, a government or political organization that is in power places these restrictions formally or covertly on oppressed groups so that they may be exploited and less able to compete with other social groups.

In both contexts – MWE and Tensta – social workers operate with people from communities who are victims of different forms of oppression. In Tensta, the conditions of oppression emanates mainly from the stigmatisation and long-term employment of immigrants. Tensta and the neighbouring suburbs have been in the headlines before, but not to the extent as during the days in May 2013. For a week, media gave shocking reports about the violent outbreaks in the area (e.g., *Dagens Nyheter*, 20–29 May 2013). From a social scientific point of view, it is important to understand the driving factors behind the outbreaks of anger and frustration. In the interviews from Tensta, informants expressed that social exclusion and stigmatisation are forms of oppression with which the social workers are trying to deal. It was argued by the interviewees that stigmatisation of the communities within the region of Tensta is not only causing high rates of unemployment among young people, but is also creating insecurity among them. According to the informants, the insecurity is felt mainly by the young people who consider themselves to be unwanted by established Swedish society. During the past few years, the situation has resulted in not only passivity but also criminality and violent outbreaks in the region of Tensta. For instance, one respondent reported:

*Young people living in these suburbs . . ./ most of them, have really open mentality, because they have been growing up with people from all over the world, in their classroom . . ./ they don’t like the way media communicate about these suburbs. Their feeling is that they put up the wrong expectations about these areas. But of course it is true as well. We have a higher rate of young people organised in criminal gangs like that.*

In MWE, community workers deal mostly with oppression emanating from unfair measures taken by other communities and the authorities that affect the livelihood of the people living in the slums. A concrete example given by the coordinator of Pragatik was the mobilisation of about 500 people by the organisation to protest when governmental funds for development of slum settings was not dispensed in a fair manner by the local politicians. Another example of oppression was given by Apnalaya:

*In 2004 the government undertook mass demolition of slums in the name of development and around 90,000 families were displaced . . . [Apnalaya started an Andolan against the policy of the government . . .] The role played by Apnalaya was that of a leader to bring people for the protest against the mass demolition and also to help in mobilisation and coordination of the movement (Grass-root worker Apnalaya).*

One of the key aspects of community-based critical social work is to challenge existing and emerging power domination and sources and conditions of oppression for achieving social justice for all in a collective manner. From critical social work perspectives, the key function of social workers is defined in relation to empowerment for social justice through the elimination of institutionalised unfairness, domination and oppression (Adams, 2008; Mullaly, 2010; Ward & Mullender, 1991). From this perspective, community-based social workers therefore need not only to support members of the community to identify the forms/sources of oppression, but also to work towards creating opportunities for emancipation of people from injustices and oppressive conditions/circumstances prevailing within the community (Danso, 2009; Rambaree, 2011; Tew, 2006).

**Collective empowerment: interventions and strategies**

A repertoire of strategies to effect change along a continuum of systems, from individuals through family, groups, organisations, to community and the broader society, is required by social workers if they are to be competent in contributing to collective empowerment (Pippard & Bjorklund, 2004). In this comparative study, starting from Freire’s (1973) theoretical conceptualisation on collective empowerment, four common community-work strategies related to collective empowerment were identified and analysed from the empirical data. These strategies are conscientising, inspiring, networking and liberating.

**Conscientising.** Both in MWE and Tensta, the community workers found it very important to contribute towards consciousness-raising among the people from the community they work with. This takes place mainly through education and training programmes provided by the organisations. In MWE, the consciousness-raising is in line with the pedagogy of Freire. Both Apnalaya and Pragatik start the conscientising process by directly addressing the community through problem identification and working towards solutions through collective strategies. The Director of Pragatik reported:

*Pragatik is like a training centre; once you come here you learn many things . . . Formal education and community orientation has to be parallel . . . our strategy is to spread awareness in the community . . .*
And the following quote, which one could imagine is from Freire, is taken from the coordinator of Apnalaya:

*Apnalaya has an open dialogue with the people in the area, and the starting point for different projects is the various problems identified by people themselves. Then Apnalaya helps to organise people . . . Apnalaya . . . works with the people and not for the people . . . Apnalaya works to provide them skills, knowledge and helps to build their confidence with which they work collectively for their own upliftment.*

If there is any critical consciousness-raising at Tensta, it is on a relatively small scale compared with that in MWE. In Tensta, the informants also talked about the importance of people knowing about society, but without any specific aim that it could or should lead to collective mobilisation and social change of the power structures in society. The focus was on the individual rather than on collective empowerment. An example of this is when a key informant from Tensta talked about the importance of creating political consciousness as a strategy for collective empowerment, and mentioned how they used to work before elections:

*The political information is one of the most important things here . . . People who have never voted have started to vote . . . When there is an election we used to gather people and talk about how to vote . . . We used to bring politicians here. From the different parties that you can talk to.*

Conscientising the community is considered as one of the key functions of social work. In conscientising the community, power within the people is created, for instance, by giving people the chance to learn about and understand the dynamics of social inequality (Hur, 2006). Within critical social worker practice, collective empowerment is related mainly to active participation of the clients/users in consciousness-raising, overcoming barriers and oppressive forces, and gaining access to personal/collective power for having control over life situations and circumstances (Payne, 2005). In particular, critical consciousness-raising – developing the ability to identify and understand social, political and economic oppression, and to take action against such oppressive elements of society – is one of the basic tasks of community-based critical social work practice. For Freire (1971), when people are supported through consciousness-raising, for instance about different forms of oppression, they can gradually perceive personal and social reality as well as the contradictions in it, and become ready for empowerment.

**Inspiring.** There was a striking difference between the discourses used by the respondents in Tensta and MWE to explain how the inspiring strategy is used within social work. In MWE, community workers use the great Indian leaders/philosophers, such as Buddha, Dr Ambedkar and Gandhi, to inspire people towards collective empowerment for social mobilisation. The director of Pragatik remarked:

*Ambedkarite Philosophy propagated equality in the country and we started to follow the philosophy . . . I found Pragatik as a social organisation having an Ambedkar ideology and vision to the development of the community people.*

In Tensta, informants also talked about the importance of giving inspiration and having positive role models in relation to empowerment. But here, the perspective was focused on the empowerment of the individual. The use of role models shows the good examples of how individuals have managed to empower themselves, rather than how they contributed to empowering the community. An example of this is when a key functionary in Tensta told about when they went to the Parliament with a young girl from the community so that she could meet a Member of Parliament who had grown up in Tensta:

*This is an individual example of empowerment. It is also a form of empowerment, to look at successful examples.*

Role models and national leaders/philosophers have been commonly used in the discourses used by the respondents in MWE to explain how they inspired their clients within the social mobilisation process. Such a strategy is rare in Sweden, although former Prime Minister Olof Palme, for example, could be one such personality for inspiring people. When developing new social work strategies for collective empowerment, social workers in Sweden could reflect upon and find inspiration from their own Swedish history. The universal welfare model would not have been realised without decades of collective empowerment and mobilisation of social movements in Sweden (Denvall, Heule, & Kristiansen, 2011). That historical process of social change, and the leaders and ideologies of the social movements, could serve as a source of inspiration today for social workers in both India and Sweden, when elaborating new strategies for collective empowerment and community mobilisation.

Social work is known to be an inspiring profession. As an empowering profession, social work inspires the community to move towards social change by focusing on the strengths and competence of the people (DuBois & Miley, 2011). Social workers can inspire those who feel that they are worthless, voiceless and powerless with concern, care and compassion (Trevithick, 2012). In most cases, social workers are aware that drastic transformation for better conditions does not happen overnight, and therefore the inspiration of people...
towards working collectively to achieve the best possible within the change process becomes very important (Mullaly, 2010).

**Networking.** In both MWE and Tensta, the community workers talked about the importance of networking as a strategy for collective empowerment. The director of Apnalaya talked about an increasing collaboration with other actors, such as other organisations and the state. In Tensta, a key functionary mentioned networking as one of the main principles in trying to reach their goals and solutions to problems. The coordinator of Apnalaya also talked about creating networks in the community, and the importance of identifying key persons with traditional leadership traits as an initial step towards the process of establishing collaboration between different parties, as well as having better knowledge of various issues and problems.

Besides working with other organisations, networking also means that social workers aim to bring people from different groups of the population together so that the people can develop networks among themselves and thereby enhance self-empowerment. For instance, a coordinator from Tensta remarked that networking is their strategy for building solid bridges with everyone and making the people feel that they can help themselves. In Tensta, networking seemed to be a goal in itself, to get people together, to interact, but also as a way to integrate and to create dialogue with local politicians.

Networking is perhaps one of the key strategies for achieving success in collective empowerment. Collective empowerment develops when people join forces in action to overcome obstacles and attain social change (Hur, 2006). Thus, social workers try to identify potential collaborative partner individuals/organisations that have similar or complimentary goals as their own social work organisations. But collective empowerment does not necessarily start by itself, simply because people get together. A core aspect of critical social work is the need for social workers to actively support and strengthen the collective power resources of excluded groups, and to contribute through social networking towards changing unequal social conditions (Healy, 2000). In that process, networking seems to be an important starting point.

**Liberating.** Lindén (2009) has problematised the aim of community work. An important question is whether the aim is basically to integrate marginalised individuals into the existing (power) structures of society, or to aim for collective empowerment and mobilisation of excluded groups to liberate them from unequal social conditions and power relations. Lindén meant that community work in Nordic countries to a large extent misses the power perspective. Informants in Tensta expressed that there is a growing need for collective empowerment to challenge social divisions and exclusion. However, at the same time they commented that there is little development of such collective empowerment practices, and the concrete practices focus mainly on individual empowerment. For instance, the coordinator from Tensta stated:

*We have to get people in this area to be part of the community development . . . In areas like Tensta-Rinkeby, I think collective empowerment is the most important thing . . . I think we are too few officials working in that fashion. Most officials, my colleagues, they are working with issues, if you have a social problem I will see you as an individual not a group.*

In critical social work, emancipation means liberating a person from oppression and injustices (Adams, 2008). In this connection, social workers adopt an anti-oppressive social work practice which addresses social divisions and structural inequalities (Dominelli, 2002). In particular, within anti-oppressive practice, social workers usually reach for the strategy of social mobilisation for collective action with reform and the transformative agendas of social justice, equity and fairness (Baines, 2011; Dixon & Hoatson, 1999). As a collective strategy to resist oppression, social workers support the marginalised communities to develop self-identity, solidarity and resistance to any kind of domination (Adam, 1978; Mullaly, 2010). This kind of liberating collective empowerment strategy was clearly expressed in interviews from MWE. For example:

*Apnalaya works to provide them with skills, knowledge and help to build their confidence with which they work collectively for their own upliftment . . . Apnalaya believes in empowering the people and making them feel that it is important for them to work in a collective and then act.*

(Co-ordinator Tensta)

*Pragatik builds up peoples’ will power to fight for a cause.*

(Co-ordinator Pragatik)

Many authors within the critical social work discourse stress that the concept of power is central in social work (see, e.g., Fook, 2002; Healy, 2005; Mullaly, 2010; Pease, 2002). Indeed, empowerment in social work is based mainly on the notion of dealing with the transmission of power for the emancipation and liberation of people for achieving a decent standard of well-being (Askheim, 2003). A core aspect of critical social work is therefore the need for social workers to actively support and strengthen the collective power resources of excluded groups, to contribute to collective empowerment aiming towards liberation from unequal social conditions. This collective
Collective empowerment perspective was found to be strong among the informants in MWE.

Conclusion

Community work in Mumbai is conducted in a context of extreme poverty, and most of the work is within the informal welfare sector, whereas in Stockholm most social work is being done within or in relation to a structured public welfare model. Both MWE and Tensta are characterised by migration and a continuous flux of people moving in and out of the area. An effect of this is a lack of a common identity and of collectivity. This means the lack of an important basis for collective empowerment. Both MWE and Tensta can be regarded as urban areas of advanced marginality, with a serious situation of structural problems on the supra-individual level, and a feeling among inhabitants that they are excluded from established society. A danger following the dissolution of collectivity and the sense of not belonging is that people might lose belief in acting together to influence their living conditions.

Networking and consciousness-raising were described as important methods by informants in both settings. In Tensta, there seems to be no direct aim of collective empowerment towards social change and liberation from structural inequalities and oppression. Instead, the focus is on individual empowerment, and the power perspective is lacking. Collective empowerment was said to be important and needed, but concrete strategies and practices were lacking. In MWE, a key aspect of community work is organising people for collective empowerment and anti-oppressive practice, to strengthen the power of marginalised groups and to achieve social change.

When social policy and welfare systems are affected by neoliberal processes and the public sector is not able to meet the needs and demands of the community alone, collective empowerment becomes of growing importance to strengthen marginalised groups in society. When elaborating such strategies, social workers can learn from the history of collective empowerment that contributed to the welfare model in Sweden; and they can learn from the community-work interventions used in Mumbai, which contribute to collective empowerment by helping people to articulate their voice for the development of socially marginalised communities. This calls for a more active role of the informal sector, user organisations, voluntary associations and the like, but also within a framework of a strong welfare state.

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Appendix

Apnalaya (‘Our abode’) is an NGO whose main area of work is with communities around the garbage disposal ground in M-Ward East, particularly in the area Shivaji Nagar. Apnalaya was founded in 1972 to help children living in slums towards a better life through urban community development projects, focusing on education, healthcare and women’s empowerment. Apnalaya considers empowerment to be one of its main roles by encouraging people to believe in themselves and in their abilities to change their lives for the better. Participation is regarded as the key, and from the identification of needs and problems, to planning and execution of projects, local people are involved. Apnalaya’s programmes are carried out by over 60 trained community-based staff, who work hand in hand with seven professional social workers and three doctors, under the guidance of a CEO (http://apnalaya.org/).

Pragatik Vidyarthi Sangh (‘Progressive Students Collective or Union’) is a community-based organisation in an MWE-community called P.L. Lokhande. Pragatik believes in socially and economically developing the people and weak sections of society by providing an opportunity to be able to lead an independent life. Pragatik’s goal is the universalisation of education by reaching all the socially and economically weaker sections of the society and encouraging the children in these areas to become a part of the society through education (http://wiser.org/).

Tensta Träff (‘meeting point in Tensta’) is a community development project managed by 15 local NGOs in Tensta, Stockholm. The objective of this association is to strengthen the civil society by developing a local house for culture in collaboration with Stockholm municipality. Besides premises for cultural events, initiatives taken by Tensta Träff include community policing, Culture Café, Tensta Community Center (high school recreational activities) and a library housed in the building. The association’s goal is to maintain Tensta Träff as base support and develop the local community activities to create better conditions for the voluntary sector by placing premises at the disposal of the voluntary sector and, in turn, assist with training and practical office duties. Tensta träff is working to contribute to break down ethnic isolation and get associations and individuals to work together for a common and better Tensta. Interviews were conducted with community workers in two of the member organisations of Tensta Träff, as well as with field workers from the Stockholm Municipality (http://tenstatraf.se/).