

## ABSTRACT

Navigating Empowerment in Mediation and Restorative Justice in Trinidad

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Empowerment has become abstract, de-politicised and adrift in global development discourse and practice. This dissertation explores experiences of empowerment in a new way using multiple case-studies. I gather oral history narratives of three wise women and use their words and themes to ground the lived meanings of empowerment discourse which emerged around the local phrase ‘getting through’. I form ‘getting through’ research tools to enquire further into the empowerment process in mediating domestic violence court cases. I deepen understandings of what ‘getting through’ entails in unrehearsed stressful everyday customer conflicts of two large powerful organisations, and in violent gang conflicts, seeking interstices where the green shoots of empowerment sprout.

South Africa’s TRC restorative narratives, corrected from feminist perspectives, guided research into local restorative narratives. Extreme levels of homicide, presented as embedded/embodied disease or ‘social tabanca’, linked into extreme gender identity constructions. Hypermasculinities, maintained through criminal gangs, shifted, mutated and de-linked in repeated re-defining performances at the Supreme Court and Men’s Forum. Responsive parenting subverted affiliation to gang peers, and reconstituted kinship. In safe spaces, skilled change agents mentored human development, re-booted agency in stages, facilitated gender transformations with better consequences for women and children, and navigated empowerment in restorative justice negotiations in Trinidad, more successfully than in South Africa.

I demonstrate how anchoring the fluid empowerment process in familiar language with recognisable local meanings in specific conflict resolution processes keeps it culturally attuned, frames it for deeper analysis and ‘puts the power back’ into em(power)ment. Unimagined transformations occurred in individuals, interactions, structures and social conditions, and re-politicised empowerment produced a local solution to the global problem of undelivered social change.

A new fine-grained Caribbean framing of em(power)ment emerged from the findings, with implications for social change both regionally and globally. Gender emerged as a crucial dimension for encouraging transformation. Re-structured power relations altered criminal justice systems, and reconstituted human values which strengthened human character, inspired gender transformations, and

demonstrated the relevance of empowerment for restorative justice transformations.

Keywords: Catherine Mary Ali; insight mediation; restorative justice; empowerment; masculinities; gender identity development; ‘social tabanca’; homicide; kinship transformation; social change.