
HER CHOICE HER VOICE

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Abstract : Gender deprivation and discrimination are omnipresent not only in India but in all societies. Feminists argue that the replacement from women to gender provides deeper analysis of present inequalities and thus challenge the structure of current social, economic and cultural processes. Drawing mainly from the human rights and feminist perspectives, empowerment would mean a fundamental shift in perceptions, or “inner transformation”. There are four components of empowerment: a) options, b) choice, c) control, and d) power. It includes women’s ability to make decisions and affect outcomes of importance to themselves and their families. It involves control over one’s own life and over resources that is ability to “affect one’s own wellbeing” and “make strategic life choices.” There are two approaches to empowerment, bottom up approach – agency approach and top down approach – Social inclusion approach. This paper explores the various constraints to women empowerment and the possible strategies to enable women to empower themselves thereby enhancing the quality of life.

Key Words: Empowerment, Inner transformation, options, choice control, power, agency approach, social inclusion approach.

Gender deprivation and discrimination are omnipresent not only in India but in all societies. The impact of women’s larger presence has helped in highlighting the strong gender differentials that is prevalent in the society. Feminists argue that the replacement from women to gender provides deeper analysis of present inequalities and thus challenge the structure of current social, economic and cultural processes. Efforts have been taken at the international and national levels to improve the status of women and empower them. This commitment was operationalised and formulated into a clear action plan at the Fourth World Conferences on Women in Beijing 1995 where Governments committed themselves to the “empowerment and advancement of women, including the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief, thus contributing to the moral, ethical, spiritual and intellectual needs of women and men, individually or in community with others and thereby guaranteeing them the possibility of realizing their full potential in society and shaping their lives in accordance with their own aspirations.”

Conceptualizing Empowerment

“Empowerment” has been used to represent a wide range of concepts and to describe a proliferation of outcomes. Initially the term was used to advocate certain types of policy interventions and strategies rather than to analyze the underlying factors. Keller and Mbweve (1991, as cited in Rowlands 1995) describe empowerment as “a process whereby women become able to organize themselves to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination.”

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fundamental shift in perceptions, or “inner transformation”. This is essential for the formulation of choices. That is, women should be able to define self-interest and choice, and consider themselves as not only able but also entitled to make choices (A. Sen 1999; G. Sen 1993; Kabber 2001; Rowlands 1995; Nussbaum 2000; Chen 1992). Kabber (2001) goes a step further and describes this process in terms of “thinking outside the system” and challenging the status quo. Empowerment emerges from the word POWER. ‘Power over’ involves an either/or relationship of domination/subordination and is based on threats of violence and intimidation. ‘Power to’ relates to having decision-making authority and power to solve problems. ‘Power with’ involves people organizing with a common purpose or common understanding to achieve collective goals. ‘Power within’ refers to self-confidence, self-awareness and assertiveness and relates to how individuals can recognize how power operates in their lives and gain the confidence to act to influence and change that. Empowerment would include Power to, Power with and ultimately Power within. Broadly, it can be observed that empowerment ranges between defining it as a largely individual process of taking control of and responsibility for one’s life and situation, and defining it as a political process of granting human rights and social justice to disadvantaged groups of people.

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Why Should Women be Empowered?

There are two basic reasons. Although corollary to them there are numerous other reasons.

1. The impact of development process should trickle down to all the members of a community. If this does not happen growth of the economy will be stunted.
2. A more important reason is women are basically caregivers. They contribute in terms of a) production b) biological reproduction and c) social reproduction. Contribution to production is gender neutral. Biological reproduction is an exclusive arena of women. Social reproduction, although not necessarily an exclusive arena of women, society has assigned this role to women. In the event of women not undertaking the second and third role, sustainability of human is in danger.

Women's empowerment encompasses some unique additional elements. First, women are not just one group amongst several disempowered subset of society (the poor, ethnic minorities, etc.); they are a cross-cutting category of individuals that overlaps with all these other groups. Second, household and interfamilial relations are a central locus of women's disempowerment in a way that is not true for other disadvantaged groups. This means that effort at empowering women must be especially cognizant of the implications of broader policy action at the household level. Third, women's empowerment requires systemic transformation in most institutions, but fundamentally in those supporting patriarchal structures (Kabeer 2001; Bisnath and Elson 1999; Sen and Grown 1987; Batliwala 1994).

The Process Of Empowerment:

The initial point of empowerment is to identify the gendered asymmetries and to contest, change and negotiate them. Change could come through social engineering provided they are not cosmetic. Alternately, it may come through direct and indirect agency. That is change in ideology.

There are two approaches to empowerment.

- a) Bottom up approach – Agency approach
- b) To down approach – Social inclusion approach

Agency is defined as the ability to set and pursue one's own goals and interests, of which the pursuit of one's own well-being may be one of them. In other words "the enhancement of assets and capabilities of diverse individuals and groups to engage, influence and hold accountable the institutions which affect them."

Social inclusion is defined as "the removal of institutional barriers and the enhancement of incentives to increase the access of diverse individuals and groups to assets and development opportunities."

At the institutional and aggregate levels, it emphasizes the importance of participation and

"social inclusion" (Friedmann 1992; Chambers 1997; Narayan et al. 2000a and 2000b). At the micro level, it is embedded in the idea of self-efficacy and the significance of the realization by individual women that they can be the agents of change in their own lives.

Some of the institutions are state and civil society institutions at both national and local levels, including informal institutions such as kinship and neighborhood networks. Institutions at the micro level, such as those of marriage and the household, are not considered part of the state or of civil society. Interpersonal gender dynamics within the household are considered part of the equation of social exclusion and in need of directed efforts at change. Institutions have a multidimensional check and control over women both in the private and public domain. Institutions have generally controlled women when they try to engage with power and try to carve their own spaces. The freedom of choice is exercised within strict boundaries that are non-negotiable. These boundaries are defined by economic class, race and caste. The freedom to choose is never absolute. For example the choice in the labour market is limited as a whole. The commodification of the female body i.e. as sex objects salable in the market. If a woman sells her intellect as a teacher, it is accepted as dignified labour and has social respect. A dancer sells her dancing ability. A domestic maid sells her physical labour. A lady doctor sells her ability to provide medical help. If a woman sells her physical self for advertisements or in films it is also accepted. But if she sells her physical self as sex worker the dignity of labour no longer exists.

To put it simply there are two elements to empowerment. They are a) control over resources and b) ideology

Here resources would mean "enabling factors" that is, as potentially critical inputs to foster an empowerment process, rather than as part of empowerment itself. They include variables such as education and employment as proxies for empowerment. Giving women access to resources be it education, property rights etc. does not lead to their greater control over resources. Changes in legal statutes have little influence in practice. Gender blind practices like the dowry system, intra household distribution of resources, occupational segregation etc. cut across cultures and penetrate deep into the social fabric of the community. Thus while resources economics, social and political are often critical for empowering women, they are not always sufficient. (Tamil Nadu's Property right Act) The complexities in the relationship that exist in families pervade into the efforts towards change. The cooperative conflict and the bargaining power in the household is limited by social choice end capability. The impact of social

institutions in sustaining gender inequalities is very high. Without women's individual or collective ability to recognize and utilize resources in their own interests, control over resources cannot bring about empowerment.

The second component, agency, is at the heart of conceptualization of empowerment. Human agency is a central concept in A. Sen's (1999) characterization of development as the process of removing various types of "unfreedoms" that constrain individual choice and agency. It encompasses the ability to formulate strategic choices, and to control resources and decisions that affect important life outcomes. All improvements in women's position must be brought about through the actions of women themselves or that empowering themselves is the responsibility of individual women. The agency which can be collectively invoked often is expressed in public spheres. But gender inequalities in the personal sphere of domesticity cannot be delinked from inequalities in the public sphere. Individual preferences can be socially architected in that the entrenched values may be internalized to such an extent that they appear as preferences and choices. Altruism i.e. socially imposed altruism is a good example. A better one would be son preference and accepting feticide and infanticide. Migration for marriage is accepted but migration for career is looked down upon. Social structural realities work in a way that they do not allow the agency to actualize in certain spheres. The cultural construction of femininity and subjectivity is made worse by the interlocking nature of place, poverty and women's lack of access to productive resources marginalizes everything that upsets the patriarchal values. Unfortunately, women have always been the repository of traditions and patriarchal values. Any effort to transcend the boundary is often strongly resisted.

OPERATIONALISING EMPOWERMENT

Local structures of gender inequalities are typically experienced as "natural," and therefore may seem unalterable. When women internalize their subordinate status and view themselves as persons of lesser value, their sense of their own rights and entitlements is diminished. They may acquiesce to violence against them, and make "choices" that reinforce their subordinate status. For ex. In the Indian context a daughter -in- law who played a subservient position later graduates to the position of Mother- in- law. She now plays a dominant role. Based on the "agency" criterion for describing something as empowerment, one might call this behavior empowered. As a mother-in- law, the woman gained the ability to exercise agency (in the

form of power over another person), in a way that she could not when she was a young woman herself.

The mother-in-law is acting within an inequitable gender system that severely constrains her ability to make strategic life choices. The system lets her exercise power, but only in ways that reinforce the system. This sort of agency is similar to what Kabeer (2001) describes as choices that reflects women's consent and complicity in their own subordination. When they lack agency in a broader sense, women should not be considered to be making empowered choices. This is called "Internalized subordination.

Women' empowerment needs to occur along multiple dimensions: economic, social-cultural familial/interpersonal, legal, political, and psychological. However, these dimensions are very broad in scope, and within each dimension, there is a range of sub-domains within which women may be empowered. So, for example, the "socio-cultural" dimension covers a range of empowerment sub-domains, from marriage systems to norms regarding women's physical mobility, to non- familial social support systems and networks available to women'. Moreover, in order to operationalise these dimensions, one should consider indicators at various levels of social aggregation – the household and the community, as well as regional, national, and even global levels.

The big question is how to break free from the vicious circle and operationalise empowerment. Much water has flowed under the bridge and women have made much headway in breaking several gendered codes. Yet whenever the privileging structures are threatened or perceived as threat all discourses take resources to orthodoxy and traditional values. The biggest challenge is to penetrate into the internalization by women themselves as well as agency's limited capacity to question entrenched gendered coding. Women have to overcome ideological and structural barriers. For majority of women Patriarchal structure is here to stay. One possibility is to expand women's functional space by expanding their domestic sphere to market space. At the other end, men need to cross over to domestic spaces and breaking traditional gendered codes for domestic responsibility. (Altruism) The gender division of labour needs to be recognized for transformative changes in the core asymmetries between women and men. To conclude the need of the hour is structural changes within the family. Although empowerment is culture specific interventions should be directed towards restructuring the power locations in the family. This is sure way to bring about changes in the patriarchal values in the society.

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