

A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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***Abstract:** The issue of women empowerment has been in the central stage with the shifting of paradigm of development and governance at the global level and particularly in India. No country can afford development without considering women who constitute about half of its stock of human resource. Women are major contributors to India's economy and an important constituent of development. Their empowerment is essential for distributive justice and for the nation's growth. Policy approaches to women and development in India have changed over the years of planned development. However, the shift from 'welfare' to an 'empowerment' approach has remained more in the realm of the rhetoric. The approach to the Twelfth Plan also exhibits insufficient awareness of the specific problems of women, their unpaid labour and their distinctive economic contribution to the nation's economy. Against this back drop, present paper highlights sociological perspective of women empowerment in India.*

INTRODUCTION

The term 'empowerment' refers to a range of activities from individual self-assertion to collective resistance, protest and mobilization that challenge basic power relations (Sharma, 1991:29). 'Empowerment' is most significant is the control of ideology, i.e., control over thoughts and perceptions that shapes individual beliefs, values and attitudes-ways of perceiving, thinking, feeling and analysing. This control in turn confers decision making power which increases access to and control over resources (Nath & Chatterjee, 1996: 4).

Empowerment particularly includes control over resources and ideology. According to Sen and Batliwala (2000) it leads to a growing

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intrinsic capability greater self confidence, and an inner transformation of one's consciousness that enables one to overcome external barrier. This view mainly emphasizes on two important aspects. Firstly, it is a power to achieve desired goals but not a power over others. Secondly, idea of empowerment is more applicable to those who are powerless- whether they are male or female, or group of individuals, class or caste.

The word "Empower" means make one powerful or equip one with the power to face the challenges of life to overcome the helplessness, suppression and inequalities. Empowerment is an active multidimensional process, which should enable women to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life. It would consist in providing greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision making, greater ability to plan their lives, greater control over the circumstances that influence their lives and freedom from shackles imposed on them by custom, belief and practice. The concept of empowerment is defined as the process by which women take control and ownership of their choices. The core elements of empowerment have been defined as agency, awareness of gendered power structures, self-esteem, and self-confidence (Kabeer, 1999: 437).

According to the country report of the Government of India (1995: 114), empowerment means moving from a position of enforced powerlessness to one of power. It would promote women's inherent strength and positive self-image.

Kabeer's (2001) popular definition adds a layer of complexity to the simple component of control and states that empowerment is "the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where the ability was previously denied to them." According to Malhotra *et al.* (2002), Kabeer's conceptualization of empowerment is particularly relevant because it contains both the element of process and the elements of human agency and choice, with empowerment implying "choices made from the vantage point of real alternatives" and without "punishingly high costs." Basu and Koolwal (2005: 17) add that choice must extend to the ability to choose NOT to do something without fearing the consequences.

Alsop and Heinsohn's (2005) presentation of empowerment utilizes these essential concepts and broadens the definition of empowerment to agency and the opportunities that are available to women. They define empowerment as "a person's capacity to make effective choices; that is, as the capacity to transform choices into desired actions and outcomes." They go on to say that "the extent or degree to which a person is empowered is influenced by personal agency and opportunity structure." Agency is indicated by asset endowments, while opportunity structure includes things like the presence and operation of formal and informal institutions, including the laws, regulatory frameworks, and norms governing behavior. Degrees of empowerment are measured by existence of choice, the use of choice, and the achievement of choice.

Empowerment is a multi-faceted process which encompasses many aspects i.e. enhancing awareness, increasing access to resources of economic, social and political etc (IWC, 1985).

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Though concept of empowerment is not specific to women, yet it is unique in that and it cuts across all types of class and caste and also within families and households (Malhotra, *et al.*, 2002). Women empowerment is also defined as a change in the context of a women's life, which enables her increased capacity for leading a fulfilling human life. It gets reflected both in external qualities and internal qualities (Mathew, 2003).

In recent years women empowerment has become a subject of great concern for the nations all over the world especially in poor and developing countries. The impact of globalization is seen eventually on position of women in some form or other in most of the developing countries with the variation of degree. The United Nations has also strived hard in an incredible way to draw the due attention of the World Community on this issue in the past years. The word women empowerment essentially means that the women have the power or capacity to regulate their day-to-day lives in the social, political and economic terms, a power which enables them to move from the periphery to the centre stage (Bhuyan, 2006: 61).

Women empowerment refers to the conferring of leverage to women who are otherwise deprived. This includes granting to women effectual decision-making power/authority and the power to influence others decisions along with economic, social and civil freedom. Empowerment, by its very definition, implies an increase in the ability to exercise power (Patel, 2012: 19).

The International Women's Conference at Nairobi (1985) defined women empowerment as "A redistribution of social power and control of resources in favour of women. It is "the process of challenging existing power relations and of gaining greater control over the sources of power."

According to the UN Population Information Network (1995) women's empowerment involves "their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally."

Batliwala (1995:128) says that "women's empowerment is the process, and the outcome of the process, by which women gain greater control over material and intellectual resources, and challenge the ideology of patriarchy and the gender-based discrimination against women in all the institutions and structures of society", and a report by CIDA (1999) emphasizes that "empowerment is about people- both men and women- taking control over their lives: setting their own agenda, gaining skills, increasing self-confidence, solving problems, and developing self-reliance. It is both a process and an outcome."

To empower women does not mean to give them power to dominate others or to use power to establish their superiority over others, as it may be commonly understood. Akthar (1994:34) observed that "We would not like women's empowerment to result in women's taking over men's power within the same exploitative and corrupt society". Women's moving to a position of power does not mean that she is going to abuse power to ill, treat and exploit men. Women's empowerment in reality is to empower herself, and not to overpower men. Griffen said that to her the word simply meant adding to women's power, and power to her meant having

control, being listened to, being recognized and respected as equal citizens and human beings with a contribution to make. Power for her meant, "Being able to make contribution at all levels of society and not just in the home. Power also means having women's contribution recognized and valued" (Griffen, 1987: 117).

Thus to empower women in the real sense is to enable them to flower their talents, facilities, abilities and capacities, and to realise their full potentialities, and real identity as also freedom of thought, expression and action, and strength to handle every sphere of their lives. It is not only to make them aware of their capacities, but also to provide them with the opportunities, facilities, and external and internal environment to utilize their inherent qualities and to develop in them self-confidence, self-esteem and social-psychoeconomic self-reliance and self-dignity and the ability to raise a voice and fight against injustice, exploitation and violence done to her (Kapur, 1997).

Women's political participation is one of the important issues in the context of empowerment. In conventional analysis it means activities related to electoral politics like voting, campaigning, holding party office and contesting election. But in broader sense it encompasses all voluntary actions intended to influence the making of public policies, the administration of public affairs and the choice of political leaders at all levels of government. Political interventions by women of India today range from movement for peace and good governance to protest against dowry, rape, domestic violence, food adulteration, price rise etc (Desai and Thakkar, 2007).

Economic empowerment constitutes one of the fundamental building blocks in efforts towards the overall empowerment of women. Participation in formal economic activities on terms and conditions which reflect the productive capacity of women, and their control over their own incomes, are some of the important dimensions of economic empowerment. Access to earned income improves women's position within the household substantially, gives them greater control over the distribution of such earnings and household resources, and generally improves their status and strength in society as well as their own self-esteem. The ability to

earn income from outside and to engage in activities other than household-oriented ones can lead to significant social change in the long run. Where women are generally denied the ownership of property and control over assets, the ability to earn outside income can become an important instrument for the transformation of gender relations and challenge many traditional modes of social and economic relations (West, 2006).

Women empowerment generally has five components : firstly, women's sense of self worth; secondly, their right to have the power of control their own lives, both within and outside home; and lastly, their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a just social and economic order nationally, internationally and universally. Educational attainment and economic participation are they key constituents in ensuring the empowerment of women. The economic empowerment of women is a vital element of strong economic growth in any country. Empowering women enhances their ability to influence changes and to create a better society. Other than educational and economic empowerment, changes in women's mobility and social interaction and changes in intra-household decision-making are necessary. They equal to men in all aspects. Women are more perfectionists in the power to create, nurture and transform (Singh and Gupta, 2013: 55).

INDICATORS OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Decision Making Power : Decision making power of women in households is one of the important indicators of women empowerment.

Freedom of Movement: Free mobility of women is another indicator of women empowerment. Women's mobility is affected by their background characteristics like age, education, marital status, type of family etc. Employment is associated with greater freedom of movement. Nuclear residence and urban setting are also associated with greater freedom of movement.

Acceptance of Unequal Gender Role : Women's protest against unequal gender role in terms of their attitude towards preferences for son, wife beating etc. is another indicator of women empowerment.

Access to Education: Education is one of the important factors that affects greatly in women's control over earnings. Women's access to education which is one of the important sources of empowerment can be measured by gender gap in literacy rates and enrolment in different stages of school education.

Access to Employment: Employment and cash earnings are more likely to empower women if women make decisions about their own earnings alone or jointly with their husband rather than their husband alone and if these earnings are perceived by both wives and husbands to be significant relative to those of the husbands.

Place of Residence: Place of residence also affects women's control over their cash earnings. Generally women in urban areas have more control over their earnings than that in rural areas.

Household structure: Household structure has an important role to play in affecting women's financial empowerment. In non nuclear family structure, influence of others is more in making such decision.

Exposure to Media : Since it is an important source of empowerment, greater proportion of women without having access to media reflects the relatively disadvantageous position of women in relation to men with regards to empowerment.

CONSTRAINTS TO WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Several constraints that check the process of women empowerment in India, are listed below :

Social norms and family structures: Social norms and family structures in developing countries like India, manifests and perpetuate the subordinate status of women. One of such norms is the continuing preference for a son over the birth of a girl child, which is present in almost all societies and communities. The hold of this preference has strengthened rather than weakened and its most glaring evidence is in the falling sex ratio (Seth, 2004). The society is more biased in favor of male child in respect of education, nutrition and other opportunities. The root cause of this type of attitude lies in the belief that male child inherits the clan in India

with an exception in Meghalaya. Women often internalize the traditional concept of their role as natural, thus inflicting an injustice upon them.

Poverty: Poverty is the reality of life for the vast majority of women in India. It is another factor that poses challenge in realizing women's empowerment. In a poor family, girls are the main victims; they are malnourished and are denied the opportunity of better education and other facilities. But if they are financially independent or they have greater control over the resources then they exhibit greater autonomy both in the household and in public sphere and are no longer victims of poverty.

Lack of awareness about legal and constitutional provisions: Lack of awareness about legal and constitutional provisions and failure in realizing it, is another factor that hinders the process of empowerment. Most of the women are not aware of their legal rights. Even women who are aware lack the courage to take the legal step. The legislation which affects women most is their situation in marriage and inheritance. As far as the rights of inheritance are concerned, women generally do not try to inherit land left by their parents if brothers are alive. The traditional belief that land should not go outside the patriarchal family operates. The legislation almost failed in case of immoral trafficking and indecent exposure to women. There are numerous incidence of indecent exposure of women in all forms of media with hardly any prosecution. Although the legal rights are in place to create an enabling atmosphere these have not been very successful in realizing women's empowerment.

Lack of Education: Studies confirm that female literacy has a significant influence in improving social and economic status of women. The female literacy rate is woefully lower than that of male. Compared to boys, far fewer girls are enrolled in schools and many of them are drop out.

MEASUREMENT OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment is a multi-dimensional concept and relates to the social attainment, economical participation and political participation of people. Further, empowerment being an ongoing

process, there is no final goal. One does not arrive at a stage of being empowered in some absolute sense. It is always relative and situation specific in context. Because of its complex and dynamic nature, defining and measuring empowerment is a challenge in any development study. More so in case of women, who faced prolonged discrimination that has resulted into gender disparity in the society. Hence, it is a challenge to define what empowerment means in its own context and to assess whether and to what extent women have been empowered. Some studies suggest a linear cause-effect model while others resort to a more process-based approach. The dynamic process might be broken into key components for a comprehensive understanding of empowerment. Separating the process into components is useful in identifying policy interventions to support empowerment, and for evaluating the impact of such interventions. Success or failures in development interventions may partly be attributed to approaches that recognise the underlying factors/parameters responsible for empowering women. Therefore, utmost attention needs to be taken in identifying the key empowerment parameters (Chattopadhyay, 2012: 30).

The approach of addressing issues related to empowerment of women from a holistic and macro-point of view acknowledging the cross cutting linkages between economic, social and political identity of woman presents a new hope. There is increasing recognition that these factors are deeply intertwined and if efforts in any one dimension remains absent or weak, the outcome and momentum generated by the other components cannot be sustained, and that it is only when all these three factors are addressed simultaneously and made compatible with each other can women be truly empowered (Singh, 2012: 14).

The literature on women's empowerment suggests that empowerment involves choice and control, it is a process and an outcome and it occurs across a number of domains and dimensions. Therefore, when thinking about empowerment, we must think of where it occurs and the dimension in which it occurs, we must consider the context in which decisions are made and the power structures being challenged, and we must look at the characteristics of the women or communities involved in the process. We must

also be aware that empowerment can occur in more than one domain and more than one dimension at a time. We must think of empowerment as process, as the whole story, from the awareness of power structures that subordinate women, to the questioning of systems of control, to making active changes and asserting power, and to empowerment as an outcome, as a state of being (Dhir, 2012: 43).

It is evident from above discussion that women's empowerment can be measured by factors contributing to each of the following i.e. their personal, economic, familial, and political empowerment. Household and interfamilial relations are to be included which is believed to be a central locus of women's dis-empowerment in India. To understand the change women undergo in becoming empowered we look at the above aspects. Various studies show that the women have been empowered based on factors such as income, households, political, decision making etc.

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