



UNDERSTANDING EMPOWERMENT: A CONCEPTUAL STUDY

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Abstract:

The term 'empowerment' has drawn the attention of intellectual community and even the policy makers across the world. Empowerment reflects upward mobility. Development and other streams of studies began to examine the concept 'empowerment' from a several dimensions. However, interpretation of the term 'empowerment' from a political perspective is more appropriate as the term is centered round the concept 'power'. This paper presents the origin of the term 'empowerment', its epistemological and theoretical understanding. So, this paper adopts an analytical study to have a broader understanding of the term 'empowerment'.

Keywords: Empowerment, Power, Women

Introduction:

United Nations Former Secretary- General Ban Ki-moon stressed the need to empower women. Along with global goals on gender equality the empowerment of women need to take place by school enrollment, economic independence, and representation in decision-making boards. He cautioned that in most countries, women are underrepresented in decision-making position, and their work is undervalued, underpaid, or not paid. Ban Ki-moon states, 'Out of more than 100 million children who are not in school, the majority of them are girls. Out of more than 800 million adults who cannot read, the majority of them are women. Gender equality and women's empowerment are considered to be a desirable byproduct of human development. Therefore, to achieve these goals, it is essential to close the gender equality and empowerment gaps in education, employment, and political participation. (Sonia)⁷¹

The above paragraph emphasizes the need for empowerment of women in all sectors. This voice for the women empowerment is getting reckoned at international platforms. Most of the countries are finding rational in converting the philosophy behind women empowerment into policy and acclaim the legal status to it. However the above said attempts by the state as well as international actors have shown promising, the undercurrent this paper tries to draw is that the journey of women empowerment has long way to go and in this process the understanding on empowerment also need to be examined. This paper presents the understanding on empowerment by placing the perspectives and its theoretical understanding.

Origin of the word:

The Oxford English Dictionary for the first time in the year 1849 defined empowerment as 'the action of empowering; the state of being empowered'. (Nicola and others., 2002) According to the Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior, the current use of the term

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'empowerment' actually appeared for the first time in the book *Black Empowerment* by Salomon, where it was used to describe a social work methodology with marginalised African-American communities. (Cecilia and others., 2009) However, the verb 'empower' from which this noun is derived was first apparent in the English language some two hundred years before. The word 'empower' is of French and Latin derivation consisting of the preposition 'em' and the noun 'power'. 'Em' probably comes from the Old French for 'en', and they were, at one time, interchangeable words meaning 'in'. (Nicola) Accordingly as per Oxford English Dictionary the word 'empower' placed as [en + power] was used as 'impower' and 'impowre' – to invest legally or formally with power or authority; to authorize, license.² The Latin source of 'em' is, however, more complicated. 'Em' and 'en' also held the same definition of to 'look' or 'come'. This provokes interesting thought as to modern interpretations of the word 'empowerment', but it is more likely that its origins lie with the preposition 'in' which denoted space, and was defined as 'into; onto; towards or against'. This form of the Latin would explain the emergence of another spelling of the word, 'impower'. (Nicola) The word 'impower' was first used in 1655 by Fullker in his work stated as 'these visitors, not as yet impowered by law....'. Swift. T. Tub stated in his works in 1705 as 'I do past. The Commissioners were....impowered to survey the lands adjoining to the city of London.....' here 'impower' meant as – to impart or bestow power to an end or for a purpose, to enable, permit. (Cecilia and others., 2009) The first recorded use of the word 'empower' and its derivations was in the seventeenth century by Hamon L'Estrange in his book *The Reign of King Charles*. This first usage was synonymous with the idea of authorizing or licensing: "Letters from the Pope", wrote L'Estrange, "empowering them to erect this college." The idea of authorizing and licensing is one that the Oxford English Dictionary still sees as common and, indeed, this remains the legal and constitutional usage of the term in today. Additionally, it acknowledges the existence of a second definition, which is to 'impart or bestow power to an end or for a purpose; to enable, permit', which was first used in 1667 by Milton in his famous work *Paradise Lost*: "Thou us impow'rd to fortifie thus farr." (Nicola)

Having said about the root of the word 'empowerment', its origin and development, it is important to define the term, but this attempt itself is a major issue because as it lead to ambiguity because of varying definitions and interpretations.

However, there are two original definitions of the word 'empower', which the Oxford English Dictionary states are now rare or obsolete. These are "to bestow power upon, make powerful" and "to gain or assume power over". The apparent obsolescence of these definitions may surprise many modern theorists who rely solely or partly on these definitions to support their theories of empowerment. It seems that we must move away from the connection of empowerment to power *per se*, and address instead its more indirect end, as per the Oxford English Dictionary's more common usage, that is the acknowledgement of power to achieve an end rather than as an end in itself. In this respect, power is an essential component of any interpretation of empowerment, not least because it remains its root word. The original usage of the word and its present definitions do not refute this, but there is a danger that over the centuries of usage the importance of power, within the concept of empowerment, has been overemphasized. Nowadays, there is a constant need to remind the reader that empowerment is not 'power itself', but a process by which the latter is only bestowed to an end or for a purpose. Lukes argues that power is the capacity not only to impose one's will but also to set the terms of agreement. In this sense, one would see power as something which one has over another. The conception of power as 'power over another' is predominant in the literature and indeed the interpretation of power in terms of domination and oppression emerges from a review of the use of empowerment across disciplines.

Even though the term 'empowerment' is defined it is still ambiguous because of the differences. These differences stem from the many different origins and uses of the term. In addition to these differences, the term 'empowerment' does not translate easily or equally. The Spanish word *empoderamiento* implies that power is something provided by a benefactor to a beneficiary, a clear example of 'power over'. According to the dictionary, *empoderar* is an obsolete word. Garcia Moreno asks why *empoderamiento* is used as the translation by development agencies instead of *apoderamiento* or *fortalecimiento*, which come from verbs in current use. He suggests that the term *empoderamiento* allows the perpetuation of an ambiguous discourse, permitting institutions with different ideologies to establish their own agendas. Bucheli and Ditren describe how one workshop discussion in Nicaragua led to a consensus that the term 'participación social' better reflects the English use of the word. In both German and French, the English 'to

² Oxford English Dictionary., Vol-1., (USA, Oxford University Press, 1971) p.855

empower' can be translated into two different verbs: ermächtigen/autoriser (which suggests 'power over') on the one hand, and befähigen/rendre capable ('power to') on the other. There are other possibilities for a French translation: the Quebec French dictionary uses the word autonomisation; the World Bank uses the words demarginalisation and intégration. Empowerment is also found in the literature as renforcement des capacités and participation. (Nicola., 2002)

In spite of having differences a proper attempt would be made in this research to come out clear with the interpretation of the term 'empowerment'.

Perspectives on Empowerment:

The idea of 'empowerment' has taken different notions, policy stands and actions in different international organizations, associations and countries. So it is important to see these perspectives.

➤ *United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)*

UNICEF perceiving empowerment mainly based on gender. A principal contribution of UNICEF to women's rights is through empowerment of the girls who will become women, so that they can take their place as adults able to claim their own rights, and assume their full responsibilities as duty bearers towards the next generation. UNICEF also recognize that gender equality among adults, expressed in equal enjoyment of rights and mutually respectful relationships in both the public and private spheres, provides an essential context in which girls and boys can learn the gender-equal attitudes and behaviours that will sustain human development and development goals such as the MDGs over time. UNICEF works for women's rights not only as an inherent good for societies as a whole, and in recognition of women as agents of human development, but specifically because the empowerment of women facilitates the very environment in which gender-equal results can best be achieved for children. (UNICEF., 2010)

➤ *United Nations Development Program (UNDP)*

According to UNDP 'Empowerment an increase in people's ability to bring about change is central to the capability approach. It emphasizes the ability of individuals and groups to engage with, shape and benefit from political and other development processes in households, communities and countries. Valuable intrinsically, empowerment has also been linked to many development outcomes. Human Development Report states, Human freedom is vital for human development. People must be free to exercise their choices in properly functioning markets, and they must have a decisive voice in shaping their political frameworks. It seen empowerment as integrate gender equality and women's empowerment into poverty reduction, crisis prevention and recovery, democratic governance, and environment and sustainable development. (Human Development Report 2010)

➤ *Diverse Women for Diversity (DWD)*

DWD takes globalisation as its point of departure, acknowledging that it hits women most. Globalisation also means globalisation of poverty, food insecurity and social disintegration. It connects global processes with everyday lives of women. Major issues are food security, economic security, environment security and peace. Since women as a collective force have been missing in global processes DWD is increasingly engaged in international negotiations on issues like peacemaking, economic globalisation and trade, biodiversity, biotechnology and international property rights. Their aim is to link up the global level with the local. (Vathsala.,)

➤ *Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)*

SDC stresses on poverty in understanding the empowerment process. It conceptualises empowerment as an emancipation process in which the disadvantaged are empowered to exercise their rights, obtain access to resources and participate actively in the process of shaping society and making decisions. However, SDC's commitment to empowerment also involves a political dimension, which aims to tackle those development models, interests and power relations that are the causes of injustice and poverty. According to SDC taking a multidimensional approach requires defining empowerment in terms of both individual capacities and collective action to address inequalities that are the causes of poverty. A focus on empowerment emphasises that poverty not only is about low incomes, but also emanates from social exclusion and the lack of access to power, voice and security. (Cecilian.,)

➤ *Post-Apartheid South Africa*

Notions of empowerment in post-apartheid South Africa have been closely related to ideas about democratisation, conceived of through processes of state restructuring and increasing participation in all spheres of life. Through restructuring of the state, institutions and legislation there has been a focus on increased equity in the distribution of power as it relates to the articulation and satisfaction of needs, stressing local involvement and devolution of power. Empowerment is perceived as a facilitator for the attainment of rights and as central to the creation of participatory democracy, with emphasis on the role of self-organizing. Groups held back by “structures of collective constraint” based on gender, ethnicity, race, class, age or sexual orientation have an especially strong stake in redistributing social power. Thus, participation in local democracy and decision-making is seen as central to the empowerment of previously oppressed groups in South Africa. Empowerment, as it is conceived of in South Africa, also requires broader involvement in economic and social processes, the nature of which determines practices and activities affecting the well-being and freedoms of people in society.

➤ *America- land of liberty*

While studying racial history in America it is clear that concept of empowerment is based eliminating racial discrimination. Blacks came to the American colonies as a single conscripted labor force drawn from disparate ethnic and regional origins on the continent of Africa. And, within the United States, the combination of enslavement, legal restrictions on "free blacks" in the North, and limited division of labor in a largely agrarian southern economy continued to confine individual blacks within strict group limits. Second, black immigration was coerced through purchase, capture, slavery, or indenture. Unlike other immigrant groups, blacks did not volunteer to immigrate in search of a better life in America. Therefore, unlike other immigrant minorities, blacks had little reason to hold themselves-rather than their oppressors-responsible for the hard-ships they experienced in America. Third, as a consequence of slavery, of Jim Crow in the South, and of legal restriction on freedom in the North, black Americans experienced a uniquely powerful form of racial subjugation. This subjugation took "the form of multiple legal exclusions; limited and highly unequal economic well-being, little social respect, restricted social mobility, customarily accepted invidious social discrimination, and-in particular-submission to the authority of whites in most important spheres of life, such as occupation, residence, schooling, and politics" as a result of their long history of subordination and segregation, black Americans have developed a distinctive subculture that combines in complex ways resistance and subjection to white domination Black Americans have also discovered that the political and economic routes they pursued toward group empowerment in the 1960s and 1970s had limited and temporary value. (Cheryl., 2006)

➤ *Political Perspective*

For political scientists, the process of giving power to the people is a major concern. They especially speaks on the progressive social position of the disadvantaged, including women, ethnic minorities, and the disabled. Donovan and Karp found three components of the process of empowerment: strengthening representational links, fostering positive attitudes, and encouraging political participation. De-Shalit also gives three steps in the process of empowerment in his philosophical speculation: strengthening intellectual capabilities, coping with difficulties and problems, and engaging in politics. (Mann.,) The use of empowerment in the political literature can be seen to relate to the existence of, and problems with, governmental control within a pluralist society. As has been emphasized, empowerment is not the shifting around of a constant amount of power; rather it is the creation of more power. (Nicola.,) These two works revealed that empowerment in the field of political science was initiated by strengthening physical and intellectual capacities and finally orienting those toward the gaining of power.

➤ *Field of Education*

In the field of education, empowerment was perceived as a means of liberating oppressed people. Freire, presented three progressive steps of empowerment in education context they are “conscientizing”, inspiring, and liberating. According to him, the oppressed or the disadvantaged can become empowered by learning about social inequality, encouraging others by making them feel confident about achieving social equality, and finally liberating them. (Mann.,)

➤ *Community Psychology*

In the context of community psychology, empowerment refers to Relationship building and community building, which means the community have led to changes from community diversity to community integration by active participation in community activities.

➤ *Management Perspective*

In management field empowerment concept perceived as sharing information between managers and employees. (Mann.,)

Conclusion:

The concept of empowerment gets different meanings in different countries according to the situation and the context each and every organizations have their own meaning for concept of Empowerment. The core of the 'empowerment' is to facilitate the process of acquiring the power to reap the benefit of the opportunity and thereby drive towards upward mobility. The understanding of 'empowerment' is best understood when it is reflected from a political framework.

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