

Life Experience and Challenges of Gender Empowerment

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Abstract : This article analysis the Indian situation where Indian women have created a space for themselves by sharing their everyday life experiences with other women in similar situations thus, validating and creating a new reality. It is empowering for these women albeit in a nonwestern and alternative theorization in understanding empowerment. Governments and UN agencies have been working on programmes and policies to achieve women's equality and empowerment, fighting against their oppression and subordination based upon biological determinism as women's subordinate position is socially constructed. However, development processes have led to growth without equitable distribution and prosperity alongside rising gender inequality.

Keywords : Life Experience, Gender, Empowerment, oppression, subordination.

Introduction

Since the 1990's, women's equality and empowerment has been at the forefront of government initiatives to secure sustainable development while alleviating the miseries of backwardness, poverty and social exclusion experienced by women in urban and rural environs. In this process, Sharma (2008) argues that feminists working in development have played a significant role in globalising the concept of empowerment as a favoured strategy for promoting gender equality and just development. Influenced by their work, the World Bank has suggested that empowerment of women should be a key aspect of all social development programs (World Bank 2002). In India, government programmes targeting women's empowerment have not achieved expected goals. Although women constitute 48 percent of India's population (Census 2011), imbalances in empowerment policy for women with respect to social and economic backwardness remain and women's needs and interest continues to remain side lined. As a result, for many women and their organisations, women's empowerment has simply become a useful buzzword thrown in to ensure funding for often-dubious projects and interventions. Acknowledging that women's empowerment is a process in which women increase their choices and freedom to participate, negotiate, influence and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives is a step in the right direction. However, women's empowerment will be achieved only when women perceive gender empowerment as a meaningful goal worth striving for. This necessitates harnessing women's power, utilizing their potential and encouraging women to work towards goals defined by them. Creating conditions wherein these goals are a possibility demands the incorporation of women's voice and agency as central prerequisites in gender empowerment policies and programmes (World Bank 2014).

Defining Empowerment

First, however, creating the preconditions for women's empowerment demands that we define empowerment in an appropriate manner. This is not an easy task because although, the notion of women's empowerment has long been legitimised internationally, what actually comprises empowerment, and how it is measured, is debated in development literature (Malhotra et al 2002). The World Bank (2002) identifies empowerment as being about increasing people's choices and freedom of action to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives. Although the concept of empowerment continues to be contested, in this paper we find it useful to rely on Kabeer's (2001)

conceptualisation: "The expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them." Using Kabeer's concept to study empowerment provides an opportunity to link theory and empirical research and thus to tease out underlying mechanisms that support empowerment. With focus on the lived lives of women, it offers the possibility of a deeper understanding of the subjective dimensions of empowerment by allowing the voices of women to emerge within the cultural, socio-economic and political context in which they are embedded.

Critiquing the concept

It should be kept in mind that empowerment is not directly observable, and it may be valued differently depending on the subjective views of individuals and the cultural context in which they live. The intersections of various categories including gender, raises questions about the degree to which the concept of empowerment has been adapted to women's needs, priorities and beliefs. Nowadays, governmental and other empowerment policies focus on gender relations but fail to recognize that women are a heterogeneous group. Accordingly, less attention is paid to women as dynamic, spirited individuals with an abundance of talents and qualities that could contribute to their own empowerment i.e., that include women themselves as a resource in their own empowerment. As result, conventional "one size fits all" empowerment programmes fail to address problems of the most marginalised women because they have not recognised that women's aspirations and needs are complex, sometimes contradictory or that women may have varying motives for challenging or not challenging the existing status quo (Nightingale 2011). Such projects have not included space for women to articulate their needs and have, thus, failed to address long-term underlying constraints to empowerment. Women's multiple identities of class, caste, ethnicity, gender and other forms of hierarchy and difference including social locations in households as daughters, daughters-in-law, mothers, mothers-in-law, wives and widows tend to push women to the margins and make them more vulnerable to discrimination in terms of access to basic human rights, opportunities and resources (see e.g., Crenshaw 1991; McCall 2005).

To challenge the dominant beliefs of the society in terms of hierarchy, patriarchy and power politics requires empowerment policies and programmes that seek to and understand how the convergence of multiple identities with gender manifests to impede women's empowerment. Programmes that focus a "bottom up" perspective that includes the voice and opinions of women is consistent with Kabeer's conceptualisation of empowerment and frees stakeholders to focus on the process of empowerment rather than reliance on measurable indicators that seldom reflect the 'real on the ground' situation of women.

Taking Gender Empowerment Seriously

To have a voice is to be a citizen (Drèze and Sen 2002), but having a voice without being listened to is to deny citizenship. Gender empowerment goals demand that we listen to women and take what they say seriously. If gender empowerment is to be attained, women's voices need to be heard in a broad range of decision making forums, from households to national parliaments. There must be space for women to voice their needs and challenge gender norms in their community—individually and collectively without fear (Markham 2013). As discussed above, women's vulnerability to discriminatory social norms resulting from the intersection of multiple identities can inhibit women's effective participation in social, economic and political activities. Therefore, programmes that specifically target women and girls should include elements of social learning and practice (Elias et al 2017). This can be achieved in part by decentralizing responsibility and empowering women and their grass-root organisations like Selfhelp groups, women collectives and Cooperatives as frontline implementers. However, this requires recognizing that even poor marginalised women have valuable resources in the form of life experiences that can be harnessed for transformative change.

Further, choosing an empowerment process that focuses on the experiences of the women in their everyday life has a number of consequences. When women talk to other women about their personal experiences, they validate it and construct a new reality. When women describe their own experiences, they discover their role as agents in their own world and start to establish connections between their realities. Agency and voice are the keys: “Increasing women’s voice and agency are valuable ends in themselves. Moreover, both voice and agency have instrumental and practical value too. Amplifying the voices of women and increasing their agency can yield broad development dividends for them and for their families, communities, and societies” (World Bank 2014: 2).

SHGs: micro-credit and micro empowerment

To relate theoretical underpinnings with empirical evidence, we wish to examine the role of SHGs concerning providing an organised space for sharing everyday life experiences among the marginalised women in a rural context where their access to basic rights is embedded in the socio-cultural milieu. In the process of their engagement with various Self-help Groups, these women acquire collective consciousness that is empowering which enables them to be an active agent in household decision making, raise a voice or form an opinion but only in a limited sphere.

SHGs emerged in the late 1980’s and early 90’s as a strategy to address poverty and gender-based discrimination faced by women in the developing world. Women’s access to credit is known to be the significant intervention for bringing transformation in women’s economic status eventually leading to social empowerment. simultaneously, SHGs work for group solidarity, self-help and awareness through democratic functioning (Kolloju 2013; Sugana 2006). Women have gradually managed to come together supporting each other through inter-lending thus, collective savings has been a pathway to find alternatives for their gradual economic and social advancement (Parthasarathy 2012).

Reflections from the field

Reflections from the field collate certain observations of the researchers in understanding the enabling role of SHGs that have subtly given a social space to marginalised women in raising their voice and negotiating with the status quo for better decision-making within the household. Primary data is drawn from the Muzaffarpur and Darbhanga districts of Bihar as part of the ongoing research in the field area. Field inference is based on our observation of five SHG groups from the field by conducting group meetings among women SHG members. SHG members during their meetings, strongly reflect upon their concerns for issues such as alcoholism, benefits of alternative energy sources for daily cooking, matters related to childcare and maternal health and wellbeing. In some cases, women have been able to resist incidents of domestic violence at the hands of their alcoholic husbands. Similarly, women in groups have raised their voice with the administration for providing facility of potable water in their village, use of forest products as fuel, which saves their time with regard to collection of fuel and water. SHGs can be conceptualised as “communities for women” that provide social identity to all its members. This framework allows women to acquire the preliminary social abilities of negotiation and decision-making while they are engaged in community level actions. They often transgress their household boundaries and engage in collective activities such as alcohol banning, indigenous seed saving practice, organising campaigns for maternal health and safe immunisation, and marketing Non-timber forest (NTFs) products. These activities, which reinforce a sense of “the self” can be individual or collective self among women; thus, empowerment begins in a contextualised manner.

Thus, in the field areas, SHGs have become an organised space to offer solidarity and collective identity to marginalised rural women and provided the possibility of credit at the doorsteps. On the contrary, field data also reveal an increasing burden on women to repay the loans that they have drawn through

micro-finance institutions. In this sense, we can infer that gains in women's economic status and their entitlements may be symbolic or limited in nature due to the prevailing patriarchal attitudes within the household.

Conclusion

In conclusion, creating conditions for gender empowerment demands that empowerment policies and programmes incorporate women's voice and agency as fundamental conditions. To ensure that women are heard at all levels – as individuals, in communities and nationally, empowerment must be defined in a manner appropriate for the task. If the goal is to understand the process that leads to empowerment, then we need definitions that can be theorised and empirically analysed. These commitments must also recognise women as belonging to heterogeneous groups that suffer from discrimination and patriarchy and in a multiplicity of ways, in various localities, and times. When viewed in the broader context, gender empowerment will not be attained simply by listening to the voice of women and creating space for agency as this is not enough to end the marginalization and entrenched patterns of discrimination against women. However, it is a step towards creating a vision that goes beyond merely paying lip service to women's needs. The challenge is to empower women in the construction of a new India, but this will not be achieved until the innate strength, knowledge and experience of 48 percent of the Indian population is fully engaged in gender empowerment goals.

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