

Limits to the Ideologies of Women Empowerment

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Abstract

Women centric approaches in the past believed in the provision of welfare measures as a universal remedy to her longstanding problems. Welfare measures concentrated on the provision of economic benefits treated women as mere recipients rather than participants. This paper evaluates the ideologies that seek to empower women and create an environment that can bring about radical changes in their life. However, the traditional approaches evolving the economic empowerment of women do not go in tandem with the empowerment objectives. However, a paradigm shift was made with the manifold objectives of giving voice with power to the women transforming them as agents of change. This paper narrates various ideologies for the upliftment of women and evaluates their limits from the framework of empowerment. The empowerment approach envisages greater participation of women who have the vision to identify their strategic gender needs and thereby explore opportunities to participate effectively in public life. Her involvement in the grassroots level institutions can strengthen their empowerment in social and political realms.

Keywords: Empowerment, Participation, Grassroots level institutions

Introduction

The visionaries of the modern world have made a plethora of ideologies for elevating the status of women in socio-economic domains. Attainment of gender equality and women's empowerment is proposed as goal 5 in SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) put forward by the UN. Swerving from the path of treating women as mere recipients of welfare measures, the economic empowerment of women was widely accepted as the universal remedy to achieve participatory development. The Self-help Groups (SHGs) stimulated women's collective spirit to attain common goals and that was a big step in crossing their barriers. However, the micro enterprises of SHGs and the mode of operandi of the SHGs do not go in tandem with the empowerment objectives. However, a paradigm shift was made with the manifold objectives of giving voice with power to the women transforming them as agents of change. This paper narrates various ideologies for the upliftment of women and evaluates their limits from the framework of empowerment.

Evolution of Approach to Women Empowerment: From Welfare to Empowerment

Nowadays, new vistas of approaches from 'welfare' in the 70s and now to 'empowerment' in the 90s, spelt out the inclusion of those who were hitherto excluded. "Researchers moved away from a preoccupation with the role of women within the family and women's reproductive responsibilities towards an understanding of the complexities of women's employment and productive (Moser 1993).

They perceive problems of women from the point of view of sex or biological difference rather than from gender terms. The earlier approaches gave thrust to the 'practical needs' of women such as the necessities of life such as water provision, housing, comfort stations, health care and employment whereas the modern approaches attended her 'strategic needs' intending empowerment and gender mainstreaming. Strategic gender needs relate to gender inequality in terms of division of labour, access to resources, payment of wages, power relations etc. The earlier approaches failed to distinguish between practical and strategic needs from a gender perspective (Moser, 1993).

Different approaches intending the empowerment of women are given below.

(a) Welfare Approach: The welfare approach originated in the 1950s gave priority to her reproductive and feeding roles rather than projecting her agency roles. Mother and child health programme, distribution of nutritious food, family planning programme were other concerns. It was assumed that macroeconomic strategies of growth and development would automatically trickle down to whoever is excluded, and subsequently, the gender gap would be filled. Esther Boserup, in her masterpiece (1970), challenged these assumptions on the basis that woman did not always benefit if the income of her family had increased. This approach lost its relevance as it failed to address issues and prioritise needs from gender framework.

(b) Women in Development (WID) Approach: Inspired by the writings of Esther Boserup (1970), WID tried to engage women in income generating projects and assigned productive roles to her. Many poverty eradication and employment generation schemes were introduced to ensure her role in development. However, these programmes were not turned out successful, because, women in the Third World countries had no time to engage in economic activities in the midst of household duties. They were not empowered or oriented enough to adjust their household duties for income earning projects. By culture, they were accustomed to believe that the predominance of motherhood and wifehood attributes would be belittled, if they had engaged in any income earning enterprises. The model also lacked the priorities of women in the Third World countries. According to Young (1993), WID approach ignored concrete gender issues like unequal power relations and the predominance of patriarchy.

The WID approach was transformed from equity approach to anti-poverty approach and later to efficiency approach. Being the original WID approach, *equity approach* addressed the gender inequality in political and socio-economic spheres and also her productive and reproductive roles. *Anti-poverty approach*, the refined version of equity approach, gave priority to the poor women and made them engage in income generating schemes. This approach ignored re-productive and community managing roles of a woman. The *efficiency approach*, based on the neoclassical assumptions of rationality and market mechanism is the final form of WID approach. It considered women as utilised or underutilised input. Moser (1983) criticized this approach, because the focus was shifted from 'women' to 'development'. The approach looked into what women could do for development rather than what development could do for women. Increased competition and privatization as a part of structural adjustment programme, unleashed the market forces and propelled the feminization of labour, mounting female unemployment and expansion of informal sector with poor working conditions. The efficiency approach neglected gender needs. Women become the victims of increased competition and conditions of efficiency criteria.

(c) Gender and Development (GAD) Approach: This approach addressed women as agents of change. It is based on the ideological perception between 'woman' and 'gender'. The GAD approach focuses on the decision making power of women as well as gender mainstreaming. Gender mainstreaming means both physical and substantial participation in all phases of decision making units in public and socio-

economic domains. This approach was rooted in a feminist theoretical framework and it has the drawback of enhancing her powers in decision making units only rather than transforming her conscience, attitude and awareness. Poor political exposure of women undermined the impact of the gender mainstreaming approach.

Upto the 70s, the above ideologies focused on struggles for social justice and equality by ensuring change in social, economic and political structure at all levels, participation of women in decision making, widening their access to productive resources and expansion of choice. In the 80s, feminists observed that women's situation remained unaltered despite state's effort to include some provisions for their development. Hence women's empowerment replaced women's development in the 90s.

(d) The Empowerment Approach: The empowerment approach developed in the mid-eighties perceived women issues from multi-dimensional views and tried to change the attitude of her, conscience, awareness and the institutional framework. This approach argues that woman should realize her power and empowerment should come from within. The empowerment approach is supposed to change women's consciousness and enable her to act as an agent to bring out change on individual and collective basis. It gives special thrust to work in grassroots organisations of women. The organization skill, emanating from involvement in grassroots organisations, cultivates spirit of participation, search of new knowledge and political activism.

Young (1993) approached empowerment as the output of the interaction of individual change and collective action. Individual empowerment is not sufficient for a marginalized community to advocate change and then to empower. For realising empowerment, individual abilities should change and this change should be reflected at the levels of community, organization, institutions and security.

Kabeer (1994) defined empowerment in terms of 'power from within' intending that the deprived group should cultivate an inner ability to control resources to choose and make decisions. She defined empowerment as 'the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices' in a context where this ability was previously denied to them (Kabeer 2001).

According to Baltiwala (1994), empowerment "is a process of challenging existing power relations and of gaining greater control over the sources of power". Empowerment is expressed as the redistribution of power between nations, classes, castes, races and gender. Here she defined empowerment with the requirement of action nourished by awareness, knowledge, critical thinking and self-esteem.

Many definitions of empowerment visualize that women take part active role in development when they participate in the decision making phase of political and economic institutions. Rowlands opposes this perception because this view of empowerment is consistent with 'power over'¹ approach and it does not involve a structural change. Rowlands opposes defining empowerment from the purview of 'power over'. In terms of power over, "empowerment means only bringing people who are outside the decision making process into it" (Rowlands, 1997). So, Rowlands argues that more than decision making ability, empowerment must include the process that facilitates people to perceive themselves as able and entitled with self-esteem and critical thinking supplemented by knowledge, new information and organisation skill.

In brief, empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process, that invokes collective and individual autonomy for gaining control over their own lives, makes people capable of taking actions on important issues confronting them. This helps people to participate effectively in decision that affect their lives at

¹It is the most commonly seen form of power. It has negative implication. It denotes a relationship of domination and subordination. For different forms of power see Baltiwala(1994), Rowlands 1997, P-11; Kabeer 1994 P-229.

family, community and higher levels of social, political, economic and cultural processes which encourages people to involve themselves in promoting their agenda for political and social actions for bringing change. The idea facilitates the equitable distribution of resources and non-exploitative relationship between people and the achievement of creative sense of power through enhanced self-respect, confidence, knowledge and skills (Varma, 2011).

Since empowerment is a multi-dimensional complex process, here the researcher should consider the regional specificities and cultural variation particular to the community or state and specific to the intervention programme. Accordingly, certain studies which measure empowerment from certain programme or interventions by the World Bank and the UNDP are reviewed here.

In a World Bank study conducted in Ethiopia, Nepal, Mexico and Honduras, Alsop and Heinsohn (2005) present analytical framework of the degree of empowerment and the impact of the World Bank intervention. The degree of empowerment varies according to the domain of the individual's operation or where he or she is working or living- may be at the market, or at the office or at a household. The study defines three major domains of operation as state, market and society. The study examines women empowerment in each sub-domain and this varies between individuals and groups, educated and non-educated and rich and poor (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005).

Individual empowerment may bring gains to her in terms of economic empowerment or self-reliance, but not empowerment at the community level (Longwe, 1998). Steady (2006) elaborately discussed how the collective action of women promoted democratization and finally empowerment in Sierra Leone a poor country in Africa. Sierra Leone was in the throes of a rebel war together with severe economic crisis. Continuous war, internal chaos and economic crisis made women to form associations to participate in politics and to mainstream gender issues. After the war, the election was announced and the Women's Forum demanded equal representation in Parliament. In Sierra Leone, women's associations promoted female educational attainment and also female economic activism. The African experience questions the existing indicators of empowerment. Illiterate women are placed in the key political positions in many African countries².

Over a period of 10 years, what changes happen to the socio-economic life of women is not a true empowerment analysis. Earlier she lived within the four walls of the house and now she goes to market. This change is not empowerment because it is the time that necessitates this change. A study conducted in Bangladesh (Schuler, Islam, & Rottach, 2010) explored the changing dimension of women's empowerment over 15 years from 1990 onwards. Using many socio-economic and political and indicators, Bangladeshi women have begun to develop new capacities, acquire resources, and respond to a widening array of opportunities over 15 years. It was found that many conventional empowerment indicators were no longer relevant. Access to education and employment opportunities have increased remarkably, but there is no correlation between education and empowerment in the case of middle aged women stressing the idea that education plays little role in their empowerment.¹

While looking at the socially excluded group, the condition of the women may be the worst (UNFPA, 2007). Here empowerment should be addressed with the issue of exclusion. In a study conducted among women from ethnic groups of Nepal, it was found that gender disparities exist in the worst form in the country (UNFPA 2007). Among the South Asian countries, Nepal has a very low female literacy rate (57 per cent). Immense opportunities have been opened up for women to make up, but often men take

² This is particularly true of Mozambique, which has 28 per cent of women in parliament. See Steady (2006)

advantage of it. The study found that patriarchal values, socio-cultural practices, biased power relations, discriminatory social structures and unequal access to power, education, and health are the hindering factors.

Based on NFHS-II data (1998-99) collected from 90303 ever married women from 26 states of India, Kishor and Gupta (2004) constructed empowerment index for all the states. After applying multiple regressions, the study concludes that education and exposure to media are the most important determinants. The study found that there has been no considerable change in an average Indian woman's empowerment over time. Kerala, Mizoram and Meghalaya are the states with meager gender difference in literacy rates. The majority of women belonged to 15 states justified wife beating. Mizoram recorded the highest score of empowerment followed by Delhi, Goa, Kerala and Punjab. Uttar Pradesh recorded the lowest empowerment score followed by Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa. The study also constructed household autonomy index, freedom of movement index, gender equality index and attitude towards domestic violence index. Surprisingly, Kerala which is often quoted for its high status of women does not come in the group of 5 top ranked states in any of these indexes.

Women Empowerment Framework

Empowerment indicators differ between countries, between regions and between communities. The concept puts on different meanings in different countries. Purchasing a toy for her child may be considered empowerment in Rajasthan but not in Europe. The concept of empowerment may change as time passes. Universal indicators of gender inequality and gender empowerment cannot be applied for measuring empowerment out of a specific program or project. Its subjective nature makes it difficult to formulate the conceptual framework of empowerment as well as to measure its degree. Since empowerment is a multi-dimensional complex process, here the researcher should consider the regional specificities and cultural variation particular to the community or state.

The essential elements of the process of women empowerment is

- It is directed to outcome-based objectives like creating awareness about realities and redistribution of power relationship. Power is the nucleus of empowerment. It does not exist in isolation but in relationships with others.
- An external stimulus can make women think in terms of how to improve their position in which the political system plays a key role. The activities of women organisations and mass movements are major external stimulants.
- It is targeted to create consciousness among women about their rights, capacity and freedom from the sense of inferiority, knowledge, intelligence and skills.

Longwe (1998) developed a women empowerment framework based on five levels: welfare, access, conscientisation, participation and control.

Welfare → Access → Conscientisation → Participation → Control

At the welfare level, the basic needs of women such as food, income, medical care, health and employment are considered. Access means equal access to resources such as education opportunities, land, labour, marketing facilities and credit. Conscientisation implies recognition that their subordination is not natural but is imposed and socially constructed and therefore the system can be changed. Participation means women take part substantially in the decision making process and also raise voice against gender discrimination. Participation is the heart of all programmes for women development. Control means both men and women have equal powers and never dominate each other.

According to Wallerstein and Bernstein (1988), empowerment is a social action process that promotes the participation of people and community organisations in gaining control over their lives in their society. With this perspective, empowerment is not characterized as achieving the power to dominate others, but rather power to act with others to effect change.

Based on Sen's idea on capabilities, Narayan (2002) states that empowerment is the expansion of freedom of choice and action. "Empowerment is the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives" (Narayan 2002). Here empowerment is based on

a) Opportunities to participate and influence local planning

b) Capabilities to participate effectively

The successful empowerment efforts of collective groups share four elements information, inclusion/participation, accountability, and local organizing capacity. The synergy among these four elements recurs 'social, political and institutional contexts' which compound empowerment. Narayan firmly says that information is power. Two-way information flows from government to citizens and from citizens to government are decisive factors for responsible citizenship and good governance. Those who are well informed can take advantage of opportunities and make appropriate choices. Access to information strengthens productive ventures, marketing strategies, financial support and rules and rights regarding basic services. Participation/inclusion does not mean physical appearance alone, but the inclusion of the excluded groups especially women in the decision making. The empowerment approach of participation treats people as co-producers or stakeholders and they can bring about changes in governance. Public action is a necessary criterion for including those people who have been out of frame for centuries and they must be given opportunities by the authority to talk in open forums. Accountability implies that the governing institutions are answerable to the accounting measures of planning. Social accountability or social auditing gives opportunities to civil society, local communities and Community Based Organisations (CBOs) to involve in the auditing of services of local and state governments. Local organizing capacity enables their capacities to organize themselves for a common cause, mobilise resources and exhibit collective activism. It looks into the significant roles played by the CBOs federated at different levels and they can participate in the decision making.

The nineties of Kerala witnessed mushrooming of women collectives accompanied by the constitutional amendment granting 33 per cent reservation of women in the local bodies. This boosted her participation in microenterprises as well as local planning. The key principles of local governance can bring concrete changes in her knowledge, participation with decision making power, social networking and overall empowerment of women and finally to a platform of change. The LSGIs can take advantage of their participation in local planning, community action and women based SHGs, micro enterprise and credit societies. The framework is based on the notion that LSG can augment her opportunities and capabilities to make them choose and transform these choices into the desired actions.

The Rise of Women Collectives

From the mid-eighties onwards, evidently, there had been a mushrooming growth of SHGs in South Asian countries. There were numerous SHGs promoted by NGOs and religious institutions. The political and civil actors although popularized gender mainstreaming, however, they followed an antagonistic attitude towards feminists and obviously it resulted in low profile of women in politics. In Kerala, the state sponsored SHG called Kudumbasree was destined to eradicate poverty through coordinated community

action under the leadership of LSGIs. Kudumbasree is a participatory women-based poverty reduction programme launched by the state government. It converges Neighborhood groups (NHGs) with the LSGs for implementing the programme. In all the panchayats, the formation of NHGs as part of the decentralized planning injected a spirit of civic consciousness among the women (Kabeer, 1994). In a state level study conducted by Oommen (2007), he reports that CBO has turned out to be a unique non-banking financial institution in the state. While appreciating its prudential management of micro credit, he is concerned about the mismatch between mounting debt liabilities and their savings which may likely to pose a serious threat in the near future.

Many studies acknowledged that Kudumbasree has a great role in the empowerment of poor women (Oommen 2007; John 2009). Oommen (2007) assessed the empowerment of Kudumbasree women in terms of knowledge, organization, leadership, and economic status. The study reports that there is little progress in economic empowerment out of SHG participation, but there is good progress in knowledge empowerment as they have been frequently involved in reading newspapers and discussion of public issues.

Limits of Different Ideologies for Women Empowerment

The planners have experimented with different ideological practices for the empowerment of women. Education and micro finance as tools of empowerment suffer from many shortcomings because these two tool view women as passive recipients of beneficiaries rather than agents of change. In the seventies, women's movements identified credit shortage as a severe constraint for engaging in income generating activities. Being designed as a poverty alleviation strategy, microfinance aimed to widen her access to resources by mobilising her small savings and bringing prosperity to her household and improving her social status.

Even if micro finance generated additional income for the family, women did not have any control over income and purchase. Numerous studies³ have questioned the impact of microfinance in generating empowerment. More than half of the Bangladeshi women have no autonomy in utilizing the loans availed through microfinance. Women in microfinance organization have trivial roles in household decision making (Goetz & Sengupta, 1996). The repayment pressure increased the tension among the disadvantaged women and this might often deviate from the goal of empowerment. To conclude, microfinance, without institutional setup and lethargy in conscience and attitude, cannot achieve the desired result.

The universal ideology of education as a tool of empowerment widens individual's social, economic and political opportunities to choose. Educated women have greater bargaining power, maternal health. Education enables a woman to attain economic independence which raise the income of the family, community and nation (Taisha & Lal, 1995), (Varghese, 2012).

Longwe (1998) criticizes that there is no evidence that women's lack of formal schooling is one of the determinants of her low socio-economic status and poor participation in political arena. She quotes the example of Zambia, where the proportion of women parliamentarians remained static in the 1990s, though it had achieved universal primary education years back. According to Longwe, schooling helps oneself to be self-reliant and does not provide education for empowerment. Women with less schooling may be more open and they may have a clearer perception of injustice of the gender inequality where as women

³ See Kabeer 2005; Goetz and Sengupta 1996

with more schooling are indoctrinated to adjust to the existing system. The schooling given to the latter helped them to progress, but, largely within the established boundaries limiting their ability to challenge the barriers (Longwe, 1998).

During the post-liberalisation period, the achievements of 'Kerala Model' in terms of lofty conventional indicators have been exhausted in giving space to women in decision making, work participation, property rights, resource ownership and political leadership. Everybody agrees that SHGs have helped to improve the wellbeing of women, but miles to go for them to achieve gender equity, as they give undue importance to credit and thrift generation rather than empowerment. In this context, supporting institutions under local governance and local self-government play decisive roles through participatory planning affirming gender mainstreaming. Women, who constitute more than half of the population of Kerala, are excluded from the key positions in higher streams of public and private organisations including planning. But, a great number of Kudumbasree women who are active participants in local governance and also beneficiaries of empowerment programme can bring robust changes in the society. The progressive changes in the roles of women in local planning trickle down to society and can bring fruitful changes. Here women, from ordinary background, if empowered, they can collectively exert influence on policy makers at the local level. Women of Kerala, having a reputation of pretty high level of conventional gender indicators and associational life with SHGs and a strong sense of political consciousness can contribute significantly to local governance and enhance inclusive and sustainable development.

However, the strategic needs of women have not been given proper attention in the grassroots level planning of many states in India. Participation is effective when it influences decision making. The massive participation of women is noted in the village assemblies of Kerala, however, they were not assertive about resource allocation and decision making in grassroots institutions is male dominated. These institutions failed to discriminate between the practical and strategic gender needs of women. Substantial participation in local planning is possible, when participants are given opportunities to act. These opportunities enable them to make effective deliberations and thus influence the decision making.

Conclusion

Many intervention programmes like poverty alleviation or financial assistance programme have failed to bring comprehensive development to women. It is being increasingly realized that the goal of any intervention programmes can not be achieved without the full and active participation of women who constitute a large section of workforce in the country. In this context, women empowerment is the need of the hour. No kind of empowerment can be attained without exploring her potential capacities in socio-economic and political domains. It is being increasingly realized that the goal of any intervention programmes can not be achieved without the full and active participation of women who constitute a large section of work force in the country. Therefore, to accelerate the growth and prosperity of the nation, it is very important to give special thrust on women empowerment. However, a paradigm shift will drive women to transforms them as agents of change.

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