

The Multilayers of Women Empowerment in India

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Abstract:

This paper examines the multilayered concept of women empowerment in India. It looks into the history of women empowerment by analysing different development models, feminist theory, and issues related to women-centric agendas. It focuses on the development of the concept and traces its transition from welfare and rights approaches to agency, autonomy, and transformation of structures. Further, it addresses the key barriers to women, such as conceptual ambiguity, intersectional differences, geographical disparities, and patriarchal constraints. The paper highlights the importance of a context-oriented, intersectional, and institutional approach to women empowerment.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Intersectionality, Gender Equality, Patriarchy.

Introduction

The concern of women was first incorporated within the development paradigms such as WID, WAD and GAD approaches. The strategy of empowerment, especially women empowerment was adopted to overcome the shortcomings of such a development agenda. Since then, through a feminist framework, development discourse, national agencies, inter-governmental organisations, and transnational actors have focused on the overall development and well-being of women. However, the fashion with which women empowerment is conceptualised across the globe is ambiguous, making it a very contentious issue. This paper, hence, aims to trace the development of the idea of women's empowerment in India. It first traces the evolution of the empowerment process in relation to women's development. Finally, it discusses key questions that must be addressed before engaging meaningfully with the issue of women's empowerment.

Evolution Of Women's Empowerment

The birth of Western feminist movements, Marxist theory, Gramsci's theory of subalterns, postmodern thought, social construction theory, postcolonial theory, and other intellectual currents have significantly influenced the debate on women's empowerment in India. Nonetheless, despite its rich intellectual foundation, the term 'empowerment' remains shrouded in ambiguity. (Bisnath 1999; Hashmi 1993; Kabeer 1998; Oxaal et. al 1997; Raj et. al 2021; Rowlands 1998; Stromquist 1995) In various studies, it has been understood to mean either a welfare approach, that is, financial support provided to women for education, marriage, domestic needs, transportation, or rehabilitation. Or a rights-based model that moves toward gender equality, emphasising equal rights, wages, and opportunities or a process of development wherein women can exercise their 'strategic choice' in social, economic, political, religious, and reproductive matters.

In post-independent India, empowerment was understood primarily as granting women fundamental and legal rights, including the right to vote. This era was marked by a formalist attitude toward empowerment. However, in the 1980s, the term acquired new meaning amid the rise of populist politics. Women empowerment started being used as a political tool that was incorporated into election strategies and

manifestos of political parties. Batliwala (2017) observes that various political movements, government policies, NGOs, and feminist organisations adopted the idea of empowerment to transform power relations within society. Election campaigns and political manifestos viewed empowerment as an outcome that could be achieved through various measures such as education, microcredit, self-employment schemes, or political reservations for women.

At the same time, in civil society, the term empowerment was operationalised as a strategy for inclusivity, but often without articulating a clear definition, thus resulting in a fragmented application of empowerment in practice. Women's interaction with the state aimed at dismantling patriarchal structures and ensuring equality for all genders; on the other hand, some studies show that such interaction failed to take into account other axes of domination, such as caste, class, religion, ethnicity, and region. (Dyson et al. 1983; Kishor 2000; Jejeebhoy et. al. 2001; Mason et al. 2003; Schular et al. 2010; Presser 2000, Jejeebhoy 2000, Schular 1993; Kabeer 1998:

An important contribution to the concept was provided by Batliwala (1993) and Kabeer (2001), who viewed empowerment as a process and not a measurable outcome. Batliwala defined empowerment as a process that transforms social power in three ways: by challenging the ideologies that perpetuate inequality, by changing access to and control over resources, and by reforming the institutions that perpetuate existing hierarchies. This definition emphasised that only financial support cannot bring social transformation; instead, change must occur within both ideological and institutional frameworks, whereas Kabeer described it as the capability of women to exercise strategic life choices comprises of three dimensions: resources, achievements and outcomes.

The introduction of political reservations at the grassroots level was initially seen as a historic win for women's empowerment. Yet, numerous studies have shown that increased political participation is not a sufficient indicator of empowerment. Rai (1999) argues that empowerment must be understood within the context of existing power relations across social and ethnic boundaries. Consequently, the debate evolved from questions of *reservation* to questions such as “empowerment for what?” and “empowerment from whom?”

Even more challenging to comprehend is the fact that there are regional and cultural differences between Indian states concerning their women's empowerment levels and practices. Gupta et al. (2004) found that levels of women's empowerment varied significantly across Indian states. Similarly, Kishore et al. (2011) revealed that while women in South India appeared empowered, they did not necessarily enjoy full autonomy, suggesting a complex relationship between empowerment and agency.

One such crucial development that has happened in the realm of empowerment has been its extension to the private domain. Mathur (2008) raises the crucial question: if a woman's body and space are not free from violence or threat, can empowerment truly begin? Despite women's increasing participation in education and employment, traditional gender roles remain deeply entrenched. This recalls Carol Hanisch's assertion that “*the personal is political*”—a reminder that women's private suffering is rooted in systemic oppression and domination.

In contemporary India, therefore, the evolution of women's empowerment reflects a shift from formal legal equality to a more complex and layered understanding that encompasses structural, cultural, and personal dimensions. It highlights the necessity of moving beyond surface-level indicators toward a deeper engagement with power relations embedded within both public and private spheres. The continued involvement of state institutions, civil society, scholars, and activists remains essential in challenging entrenched norms and fostering a transformative vision of empowerment that is inclusive, intersectional, and context-sensitive.

Need of the hour

Through the historical development of the concept, we find that the idea of empowerment has been defined through changing paradigms, each rooted in distinct socio-political contexts. It is therefore essential to conceptualise empowerment through a context-sensitive and intersectional lens. Indian women constitute a heterogeneous group—their experiences vary across religion, caste, class, and region. As Bidyut Chakrabarty (2015) aptly notes, *“Women cannot be treated as a homogeneous group because their experiences are shaped by race, class, and ethnicity.”* A one-size-fits-all policy cannot achieve genuine empowerment.

Table 1: Evolution in the Idea of Women’s Empowerment

Approach	Question of	Goal
Welfare Approach	Formal equality and upliftment of women	Women Empowerment
Gender Equality	Access to resources across class, caste, regional, or ethnic lines	Women Empowerment
Developmental Approach	Free and equal choice in sexual and familial matters	Women Empowerment

Challenges with Women's Empowerment Discourse

1. There is ambiguity in the women's empowerment concept because of changes in socio-political environments. This concept has changed from phase to phase, resulting in conflicting explanations that undermine policymaking and empowerment.
2. The need to understand intersectionality. Women’s identities are formed in accordance with caste, class, religion, and regions, among other factors. Neglecting this aspect will lead to poor policymaking and empowerment mechanisms
3. Diversity in Indian women. The lives of women are not homogeneous within India. This factor needs to be taken into account while formulating the policies
4. Insufficient focus on individualised policies. There is no recognition of the diversity that exists in each region when developing policies.
5. Continued existence of patriarchy. The prevailing system of patriarchy is embedded in our institutions and perpetuates inequality, restricting women’s empowerment.
6. Lack of transformation in the culture. A change in law has not been supported by cultural change, resulting in women being constrained by their traditional role in society.

Solutions for Women's Empowerment Discourse

1. There is a need to adopt an intersectional perspective into account. In policymaking, caste, class, religious, and regional factors should be considered to guarantee women empowerment on all levels.
2. A focus should be made on institutional restructuring. Women empowerment needs to involve changing institutions and ideologies that create and perpetuate inequalities rather than just providing welfare services.
3. There is also a need to create context-specific policies. Regional and cultural differences should be taken into consideration when developing women empowerment initiatives rather than using standard approaches.
4. Priority should be given to education and consciousness-raising campaigns. Educational projects should work toward breaking patriarchal traditions and promoting gender equality. Consciousness-raising programs can shape the attitude of society.
5. There is a need to maintain legal reforms and effective enforcement of laws. Such policies need to include legislative measures that ensure women’s protection, especially in cases of physical abuse and sexual assault.

6. Civil society organisations should be incorporated. Non-governmental organisations and community groups can contribute to the empowerment of women by implementing bottom-up approaches to development.
7. There is a need to solve problems related to societal culture. The change in mindset and overcoming stereotypes and prejudice are crucial for the process of empowerment.
8. There is also a need to coherently develop existing theoretical approaches in light of new developments, especially from context-specific studies.

Conclusion

With the development and evolution of women empowerment in India, various difficulties emerged, such as a lack of clarity about empowerment, the problem of intersectionality and entrenched patriarchal ideology. Such difficulties prove that women empowerment cannot be achieved through legal procedures. Rather, women empowerment should be approached through a socio-cultural lens. In order to address all the challenges related to women empowerment, there is a need for an integrated and intersectional approach. Women empowerment should be regarded as a process and not just a result achieved once and forever. Such an approach would allow women to have true empowerment in both public and private lives.

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