

Conceptualizing Women's Empowerment



Social Science

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ABSTRACT

The empowerment approach considers women's improved condition and position to be ends in themselves rather than only means to broader development goals. This approach focuses on meeting women's strategic needs in terms of their role. In the literature available on women empowerment, some of the concepts like gender equality, freedom of female or women status etc. are referring to as either similar or different concepts. Empowerment cannot be injected from outside by others, rather it has to be acquired by the women through their active involvement in the development process. In this way, women empowerment is a process of improvement in the existing status and abilities of women to make them able to lead their lives in an autonomous way.

Empowerment of women is a multi-dimensional approach and covers socio-cultural, economic, political and personal aspects. The concept of women empowerment is the outcome of important critiques generated by the women's movement, particularly by feminists. They clearly state that women's empowerment requires the challenging of patriarchal power relations that result in women having less control over material assets and intellectual resources. Empowerment is context-dependent: and one vague and abstract notion of empowerment cannot be imposed on all contexts across space and time.

It is a process in which women gain greater share of control over resources-material, human and intellectual knowledge, information, ideas and financial resources as well as control over decision making in the home, community, society and nation.

Empowerment is an intrinsic of a person, which cannot be bestowed by a third party. It is considered that an empowered person's behaviour undergoes a change. In brief, empowerment is a process which enables to obtain power, so empowerment can be considered to be matching with Ability to exercise assertiveness in collective decision-making and having decision making power to one's own.

As per the Oxford dictionary the word 'empowerment' is "to give power or authority to someone". The word 'empowerment' is used in many different contexts and by different types of organizations. Its meaning and understanding largely depends on the context in which it is being used. Empowerment helps the person concerned to exploit the economic environment in increasing the productivity of self, family and the society on the whole. Empowerment generally appears to be context-specific and has multiple determinants. Women are always capable of empowering themselves both in their own family as well in the society in which they do live, while external actors and agencies can create supportive environments.

Empowerment is believed to be the road to women's own equality, rights and fulfilment, while the instrumental view regards women's empowerment as the means to a better family, economy, society and nation.

Empowerment is not unidirectional and can also be diminished with a change in contextual variables. It has to be continually reiterated and established to prevent reversal. Empowerment is not easily amenable to measurement and existing measures are inadequate. A multivariate analysis is required that encompasses a multiplicity of variables and measures empowerment in ways unique to the situation.

Women empowerment is a stage of acquiring power for women in order to understand her rights and to perform her responsibilities towards oneself and others in a most effective way. Many

well known writers and researchers have provided wide ranging definitions of women empowerment. Different social scientists have explained women empowerment by considering its different aspects.

According to Sushama Sahay (1988) although there are many complex phases and aspects of women's empowerment, these selected views represents a few of the most vital prerequisites for women's achievements of individual and collective empowerment

- 1- To the extent that women can become independent in their families, they will be empowered in diverse social settings.
- 2- To the extent that women can develop their own religious beliefs and practices within established denominational and sectarian orders, they will be motivated to work towards their equality and the well being of all.
- 3- Women who increase their control over their work at home and outside home are in advantageous positions for achieving equality and empowerment.
- 4- Increased knowledge about women's condition throughout the world increases women's objectivity about their own conditions and depends their understanding of women's subordination.
- 5- To the extent that individual women connect their biographies with history, seeing the influence of broad social structures on their lives they will be empowered.
- 6- Women's mutual support is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of their empowerment. An individual woman who does not have the support of another cannot develop her potential or make her fullest possible contribution to society.

According to J.K.Pillai (1995), women empowerment is an active, multidimensional process which enables women to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life. Power is neither a commodity to be transacted nor can it be given away as alms. Power has to be acquired and once acquired it needs to be exercised, sustained and preserved.

Women empowerment can be taken as a required process of improvement in the existing status and abilities of women to make them able to lead their lives in an autonomous way. By empowerment of women is meant that the conferment of power by men's of law in all issues affecting gender interest, related to family well being and socio-economic national affairs, providing for participation in decision making in all such matters. In order to measure gender equality and women's empowerment, the concepts need to be clearly defined and their hypothesized associations with each other and health outcomes discussed. In common parlance, the terms gender and sex are often used interchangeably; however, they are distinct concepts. Whereas, sex of individuals is largely determined by biology, their gender is

socially constructed and comprises the roles, rights, and obligations that attach to them on the basis of their sex. Women face many social challenges today whether it be making soaps and incense in order to secure an income for her family to raising children amidst the harsh economic crisis. A woman is dynamic in the many roles she plays. The concept of empowerment flows from the power. It is vesting where it does not exist or exist inadequately. Empowerment of women would mean equipping women to be economically independent, self-reliant, have positive esteem to enable them to face any difficult situation and they should be able to participate in development activities.

The definitions and approaches for measuring and assessing women's empowerment manifest complex paradigm shifts over the years. There has been varying emphasis on concerns like the condition/situation of women and their practical/strategic needs. The position of women was to be enhanced through approaches based on the concepts of equity, empowerment and rights. For centuries women were not treated equal to men in many ways. They were not allowed to own property, they did not have a Share in the property of their parents, they had no voting rights, and they had no freedom to choose their work or job and so on. Now that we have come out of those dark days of oppression of women there is a need for strong movement to fight for the rights of women and to ensure that they get all the rights which men have or in other words a movement for the Empowerment of Women. The origins of the concept of empowerment go back to the civil rights movement in the USA in the 1960. It has since then been interpreted differently and filled with new meanings and is today used in such different sectors as business, social work, development discourse and by advocates of very different political agendas. The different definitions of empowerment range between defining it as a largely individual process of taking control of and responsibility for one's life and situation, and defining it as a political process of granting human rights and social justice to disadvantaged groups of people. At the former end of the continuum, where empowerment is defined largely as an individual process, empowerment can be used in the conservative political rhetoric of freeing the government of responsibility for injustices and for granting social security. Instead, the argument makes individuals and communities responsible for their own social security and welfare, without providing the necessary support and resources. The empowerment of women is located within the discourse and agenda of gender equality and is increasingly being taken in the agendas of international development organizations, perhaps more as a means to achieve gender equality than as an end in itself. Gender equality is addressed at these different levels with the aim of increasing equality between men and women, and achieving women's empowerment. In this way achieving control is an essential element of women's empowerment which includes the

ability to direct or to influence events to protect.

One cannot claim empowerment unless the interviewing process involved women as agents of that change.

Empowering women through increased awareness of their rights and duties as well as access to resources is a decisive step towards greater security for them.

The process of empowerment which seeks an equitable and active share. For women has to deal with the burden of ideas and values which are passed on to women in a society as part of their socialization process from their very childhood. This social conditioning becomes part of her person and mindset and influences her behaviour. So women empowerment is a process which helps women changing their own ways of thinking and behaviour.

Empowerment is the process of revitalization of local people by giving more powers and responsibilities so that they can utilize the opportunities, resources available for sustainable development.

Women's empowerment is vital to sustainable development and the realization of human rights for all. Women's empowerment addresses power and relationship in society intertwined with ethnicity, gender, race, class, age and culture. Power is identify with equity and equality for women and men in access to resources, participation in decision-making and control over distribution of resources and benefits. Like other developing countries in India women are discriminated and marginalized at every field of the society whether it is social participation, political participation, economic participation or proper access to education and healthcare. One of the major aspects of women empowerment is to change the attitude of society towards women. Empowering women simply means to provide them all the socio-cultural, economic and political opportunities in order to enhance their status and condition in the power structure of the society. Empowering women aims to encourage women to break free from the chains of limiting belief patterns and societal or religious conditioning that have traditionally kept women suppressed and unable to see their true quality and power. Empowerment is the process of revitalization of local people by giving more powers and responsibilities so that they can utilize the opportunities, resources available for sustainable development.

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