

Ganeshman Darpan

ISSN: 2091-2404

Volume: 7, Issue: 1

Women Empowerment: A Grossly Misunderstood Social Priority

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: September 10, 2022

Revised: December 1, 2022

Accepted: December 12, 2022

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Abstract: The globalized world with historically diverse inheritance has carried with it 'not so good' side of gender discrimination. Women continue to be 'unequal half' of men due to the psychological barrier of patriarchally-structured society that has covertly institutionalized male supremacy and

male hegemony. Through the journey of women empowerment, the world has been struggling to offer a gender-free life. This article attempts to analyze the status of women empowerment and highlights the related issues and challenges. This study is a content analysis of literature from secondary source. It reveals that women are relatively disempowered and continue to hold the 'subordinated statuses compared to men in spite of loud propaganda of the efforts undertaken to achieve gender equality in real life. The article suggests holistic ways to rethink context-driven women empowerment and concludes that changes in social norms and beliefs, access to life-skill education, and equal participation in decision making are the major enabling factors for this.

Key Keywords: *Empowerment, Equality, Gender, Power, Women*

Introduction

Empowerment is a widely used term, but is seldom defined with universal acceptance. Viewed by many as a vague concept, confusions arise because the very concept of 'power' at the root of empowerment itself is disputed. In developmental discourse, empowerment approach places emphasis on autonomous decision making for communities, local self reliance, direct democracy, and experiential social learning. European Parliament (2016, p. 10) defines empowerment as a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their lives. It should enable individuals or groups of individuals to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life (Kulkarni, 2017, p. 1). It is a continual process of reaching states that bring one to a

place from which one cannot return to previous stages of powerlessness (Jackson, 2010, p. 114).

Long before the word 'empowerment' became popular, women were speaking about gaining control over their lives (Rahman, 2013, p. 9). Half of humankind, women today constitute forty percent of the global workforce (Saini, 2017, p. 7154). Nevertheless, there is continued inequality, oppression, and vulnerability of women in all spheres of life. While women comprise more than forty percent of the agricultural labor force, they represent only twenty percent of landowners. They earn approximately seventy seven percent of what men earn. At the current rate of change, wage equity between women and men cannot be achieved before 2086 (Pluess, 2016, p. 9). In order to fight against socially constructed gender biases, therefore, women need to swim against the system requiring more strength that comes from the process of empowerment (Sundaram, Sekar & Subburaj, 2014, p. 76).

During Stone Age period, women had equal status and power with that of men. But they started facing difficulties in epic ages. Consequently, discrimination against women from womb to tomb became the 'lived reality' of human society (Sundaram et al., 2014, p. 76). History had times when women were treated even as slaves (Kaviarasu & Xavier, 2016, p. 1). Today, world constitutions in principle protect women from discrimination and exploitation but lack enforcement mechanisms in practice.

In the words of Batliwala (1994, p. 130), "Women empowerment is ... to challenge patriarchal ideology; to transform the structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination and social inequality; ... and to enable poor women to gain access to, and control of, both material and informational resources." Kabeer (2001, p. 24) argues that the choices open to women are often limited compared to men of the same community – a manifestation of gender inequality – and that women can internalize their lesser status in society. And here comes the issue of empowering them at par with men. Rowlands (1998, p. 23) insists, "Empowerment in close relationship with husbands, parents, and mothers-in-law is the area of change that comes hardest ... and where positive and negative aspects of her life tend to be most closely intertwined." And I align with all these scholars arguing that women empowerment is an ongoing process of equal participation of women in society to live their own voice challenging any sort of discriminatory male domination or supremacy.

Women empowerment undisputedly relies heavily on gender equality, which has been accepted as a human right. At the beginning of the new millennium, world leaders had

gathered at the United Nations and drawn a broad vision reflected in eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that included ‘Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women’ (United Nations, 2015, p. 5). The report claims that the developing regions as a whole achieved the target to eliminate gender disparity in primary, secondary, and tertiary education. In Southern Asia, only seventy-four girls were enrolled in primary school for every one hundred boys in 1990 but changed to one hundred and three girls enrolled for every one hundred boys. Further, women gained ground in employment and political representation in nearly ninety percent of one hundred and seventy-four countries. The average proportion of women in parliament almost doubled. Despite these gains, the world still faces a persistent gap between women and men in access to opportunities and decision-making power. Women continue to be a struggling lot in education and economic participation with greater health and safety risks and less political representation.

Given the above scenario, guaranteeing the rights of women and giving them opportunities to reach their full potential is critical for attaining gender equality. Empowered women contribute to the health and productivity of their families, communities, and countries, creating a visible effect that benefits everyone. So, women empowerment as an issue is invariably an inevitable condition of achieving gender equality in the world.

Objectives of study

This article is guided by the narratives that basically attempt to meet three objectives: (a) To explore the issue of women empowerment and its relevance; (b) To identify the barriers and challenges to women empowerment; and (c) To understand and explain the implication of empowering women.

Methodology of study

This paper in essence is analytical and descriptive in nature. It attempts to analyze the causes and effects of women empowerment in general with a particular reference to Nepal. The discussion undertaken in the paper is purely based on secondary sources with self reflection of the author.

Discussion

Human society is composed of numerous components that are underprivileged of their basic rights, but these components lack the awareness of their rights. If we enlist such components, then women would top the list. In fact, women are the most important factor of a society. Even though everybody is aware of this fact, yet there are few takers

of it. As a result, the space for women is threatened today. There is a growing tendency of under-estimating women that makes them occupy a secondary place in society denying them of life choices. Here appeared the need for empowering women at par with men.

The term 'empowerment' has arguably been overused, misused, and co-opted. At its core is 'power', which is deeply rooted in our social system and values permeating all aspects of life from family to community, from personal dreams and aspirations to economic opportunities (Chokhal, 2013, p. 69). Feminist scholarship suggests that women's experiences of connection and relation have greater understanding of power. From this perspective, women empowerment is viewed as a process through which women come to recognize their inherent worth, power within, and begin to participate on equal terms with men in efforts to dismantle patriarchy and promote social and economic development. Meanwhile, education strongly emerged as the leading force of women empowerment though much needs to be researched how education empowers women differently. Whatever, serious international attention is drawn in the recent decades to the goal of women empowerment vis-à-vis women education.

Women's empowerment connotes their economic fitness that implies a better quality of material life through sustainable livelihoods owned and managed by them. Women's social empowerment means a more equitable social status for them in society. Women's political empowerment means a political system favoring their equal participation and their control of political decision-making process including governance. Women's psychological empowerment aims to enhance their self-esteem and confidence to encourage greater participation in general life domains. In the Nepalese society, parents treat daughters as 'property of others', while parents-in-law see daughters-in-law 'as a curse'. Women who get divorced to escape oppressive marriages or who are abandoned or widowed by their husbands have no social status.

Though variations are apparent globally, women's position in relation to men as a whole is far from promising. Patriarchal values and customs embedded in religion and social laws continue to relegate women to a subordinate position in gender relation. Though there are laws at place upholding gender neutrality, they are not sufficiently enforced. Patriarchy continues to adversely impact women's enrollment in higher education, employment in the public sphere, and political involvement. Importantly, a social approval of 'women with men everywhere' alone can ensure real empowerment else it will remain low.

In view of the above, governments, non-governmental organizations, and international agencies need to focus more on strategies for empowering women in conservative societies. There has to be better networking and coordination among women's wings of different sectors for achieving an integrated effort to empower women. Gender mainstreaming activities should be properly integrated at the local level so as to encourage political empowerment of women. Organizations undertaking empowerment activities should be locally based and focus also on raising men's awareness while empowering women. Women's literacy and vocational education should be blended to provide opportunities of employment locally. Lastly, laws protecting women must be effectively implemented and made available to all sections of society without discrimination.

Women's Economic Empowerment

The most important need of women is their economic empowerment, which is all about facilitating exploration of full potential by them. This is not possible if women do not have access to good education and healthcare, they are kept away of power to make economic decisions, their labor is consistently devalued, and they do not enjoy freedom from harassment or violence. This does not mean that all women will pursue the same path to economic empowerment; some will do so through entrepreneurship, others will climb the corporate ladder, and some will excel on the factory floor. But for all women, becoming empowered means having knowledge, tools, and power to make decisions for themselves (Pluess, 2016, p. 9). In gist, economic intervention is the right way to empower a woman as it will bring change in economic status of her family and remove her dependency upon the family (Thapa & Gurung, 2010, p. 7).

Women's empowerment and economic development are closely interrelated. On one hand, development alone can play a major role in driving down inequality between men and women. On the other hand, empowering women may benefit development (Duflo, 2011, p. 2). This is a bi-directional relationship defined as improving the ability of women to access the constituents of development, in particular health, education, earning opportunities, rights, and political participation. Empowering women, in other words, can accelerate development. Policy makers argue that gender equality improves when poverty declines. They believe that when focus is on creating conditions for economic growth and prosperity, specific strategies need to be adopted to target improving the condition of women (p. 4).

Economic empowerment involves gaining control over productive resources and enabling women to make independent financial decisions. Women in Nepal have already realized the need to be involved in the economic sphere as a means to supplement the household income and gain a certain level of independence. However, these women are mainly relegated to low-skill and repetitive jobs in the industrial sector. This is because of a lack of education and training opportunities, employer biases, and limited mobility due to family responsibilities. Constitution provides for women to enjoy equal rights to employment and equal pay for similar jobs, but this is rare in practice (Mahat, 2003, p. 69).

There are misconceptions in society that as countries develop, women empowerment will occur naturally. Does that mean there is no need for specific policies improving the condition of women, fight poverty, and create conditions for overall economic growth? Recent researches suggest that economic growth, by reducing poverty and increasing opportunity, can indeed have an important positive impact on gender equality (Duflo, 2011, p. 5).

Women's Political Empowerment

Next to economic self dependence, women deserve political empowerment by which they can be involved to formulate, execute, and monitor policies and laws. For this, women need necessary political education, orientation, and awareness that eventually develop their ability to be independent thinkers and analysts to make their own power choices in the matters of democracy, elections, and governance.

A critical mass of women political representatives must be at every level of decision-making. However, women have extremely limited power at the decision and policy-making levels of political bodies, as well as in government bureaucracy. Though almost all political parties have formed women's caucuses, no organization has been able to put gender issues onto the political agenda in more than a rhetorical way. Disappointingly, they have been unable to provide moral and financial support to women who are interested in becoming involved in politics. In addition, women rarely get family support to go into political careers unless a woman's family has a strong background in politics (Mahat, 2003, p. 69).

The lack of women's participation in political decision making has critical consequences. It deprives women of essential rights and responsibilities as citizens, and excludes their perspectives and interests from policy making. Their voices are missed from key decisions on national and governmental priorities. Significantly, socio-

economic conditions are the key factors determining the levels of women's participation in the political process. As such, there is a correlation between improvements in women's socio-economic standing and increased political participation (Upadhya, 1996, p. 427).

Women's Social Empowerment

Being a social creature, women seek identity, dignity, respect, acceptance, and involvement in life rituals similar to men. They have an equal space in all customs, traditions, manifestations, and celebrations of their households, families, and larger communities. This is encompassed by women's social empowerment in their mutually related roles and functions in relation to men. Hence, connecting empowerment with the fulfillment of equality and the realization of rights must be socially driven in order for empowerment to be practised in cultures where gender equality is not the norm (Porter, 2013, p. 3).

In order to have social empowerment of women, it is of foremost importance to raise their level of education (Sundaram et al., 2014, p. 76). This will also require educating men as a gender gap in education is found to have negative implications. It will be important to focus on different types of education, at different levels. In some cases, technical training is more relevant than actual formal education (Sell, 2018, p. 7).

Culturally sensitive social empowerment of women, thus, is a powerful ethical goal to transform them politically linking with justice, equality, and rights. This becomes important in fostering societal solidarity. Undeniably, a rights-based commitment to gender equality is the foundation on which culturally literate strategies of women's social empowerment can be fostered.

Women Empowerment in Nepal

A socio-culturally diverse country in South Asia, Nepal has a remarkable demography with women outnumbering men. A historically agricultural economy, Nepal has made a shift to remittance-economy in the recent decades bringing an impact even upon gender relations.

The situation of women in Nepal is characterized by low level of access to education, healthcare, and life opportunities. Despite increasing efforts to empower them, there has been little improvement in the socio-economic status of women at the grassroots level (Mahat, 2003, p. 67). The Nepalese women, in general, lag far behind than men, who have control over women's bodies and lives. Women helplessly take care of children while performing back-breaking household chores. They have no control over

the decisions regarding household, community, and political activities. These factors cause low self-esteem among Nepalese women (p. 69).

Of late, there have been gradual changes in women's conditions as a result of both development interventions and broader processes of urbanization. Women's literacy rates have increased though they remain low; fertility rates are slightly reduced; and the age of marriage has increased marginally compared to the past. However, majority of rural women continue to be engaged in agriculture. In view of the increase in incidence of poverty, large numbers of women have turned to non-agricultural labor market where they are low-paid and have less productive avenues. Despite increases in literacy and social mobility, women's awareness level remains low. Among such challenges, the key one is the integration of women's issue in the national development plans (Poudel, 2015, p. 13). In brief, situation of Nepalese women has improved somewhat but they still fare poorly compared to the achievements elsewhere in the world over the same period.

Conclusion

Powerful but incessantly an abstract notion, 'empowerment' today has become a synonym for enabling, participating, and speaking-out. Some agreements about empowerment are – (a) It is a multidimensional process of change from a condition of disempowerment; (b) It cannot be bestowed by a third party as individuals are active agents in this process; and (c) It is shaped by the context in which people live. Empowerment responds to difference, thrives on security, mobilizes insecure communities to deal with conflict, and is transformative in creating practical changes including people's participation in decision-making across all cultures and gender.

Talking of women empowerment, there are many challenges posed to it. They include education, health, safety, household inequality, workplace inequality, and poverty alleviation. Eradicating the gap between men and women education for their equal space in the world has a long way to go. Health and safety concerns are other crucial factors. In households, women are still restricted to giving birth to young ones. There is inequality in employment opportunities and absence of equal status.

Women empowerment is not a magic bullet it is sometimes made out to be. Equity between men and women is only likely to be achieved by continuing policy actions that favor women for a very long time. Women empowerment is also not an end in itself, but a pivotal step towards establishing gender equality. In part, gender equality is manifested through a just and equitable sharing of responsibilities by men and women.

Gender equality is not synonymous with gender parity and does not mean that men and women are the same or need to split work exactly in half. Rather, it characterizes social conditions and relationships in which a vision of mutuality and cooperation shapes interactions and enables men and women to reach their full potential.

At the end of the day, it is education that empowers women in all earnest. Although the world is making progress in achieving gender parity in education, girls still make up a higher percentage of out-of-school children. Typically, families with limited means cannot afford the cost of school fees, uniforms, and supplies for all of their children. They also eye female labor for household chores etc sparing limited time for their schooling. But girls need education for empowerment. An educated girl is more likely to postpone marriage, raise a smaller family, have healthier children, and send her own children to school. She has more opportunities to earn an income and to participate in political processes.

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