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# Women's Empowerment: Concept and Beyond

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# Women's Empowerment: Concept and Beyond

Md. Aminur Rahman

*Abstract* - Long before the word `empowerment' became popular, women were speaking about gaining control over their lives, and participating in making the decisions that affect them in home and community, in government and international development policies. But problem is, very few have clear conception on empowerment. This is very easy to say but difficult to understand what is empowerment? This article takes an initiative to clarify the concept based on several scholar's views. And finally, make a conclusion with alternative analysis of women's empowerment.

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## I. Introduction

The rise of gender sensitivity is one of the distinguishing features of our times. It has taken hold human imagination like never before. For all practical purposes, the concern of gender equity has graduated to the level of a policy objectives (Sharma : 2000). Two perspectives have emerged in the contemporary discourse on the modalities of gender equity; women's development and women's empowerment. It is Easter Boserup's (1970) pioneering work, Women's Role in Economic Development that paved way to the rise of women's development perspective. According to Sharma (2000;21), the development strategy, however, has come under severe interrogation not only for its failure to deliver its promise but also for working against the interest of womankind. Consequently, the decade of 90s has witnessed the rise of women's empowerment perspective which shot into prominence at Beijing Conference.

As our experience, Paulo Freire (1996) in his book Padagogy of the Oppressed has discussed `empowerment' in a formal way for the first time in 1970s. And after him, many scholars discussed it as human potential especially for women empowerment. Caroline Moser (1993), at first, discussed it as redistribution of power. But as a concept, `empowerment' is widely used, but seldom defined. The often-uncritical use of the term "empowerment" in development thinking and practice disguises a problematic concept. There is a room for greater clarity about the concept and its application. Confusion arises with the concept empowerment because the root concept 'power' is itself disputed.Power has been the subject of debate in social science. Some definitions focus, with varying degree of subtlety, on the availability of one person to get another person or group to do something against their will. Such power is located in decision-making processes, conflict, and force, and could be described as zero-sum; or the 'power to create such relationship as love, respect friendship, legitimacy and so on. To try to come closer to an understanding of empowerment we need to look at the actual meaning of the term that has been variously used by writers and researchers, in a variety of context' (Rowland, 1997). And let me attempt to discuss few concepts here on empowerment to understand the concept.

*Rawland's (1997) view :* According to Rawland, in order to understand the process of empowerment, there is a need to be aware that power can take many different forms. Rawland explains :

a. *Power over:* Controlling power, this may be responded to with compliance, resistance (which weakens processes of victimization) or manipulation.
b. *Power to:* Generative or productive power (sometimes incorporating or manifesting as forms of resistance or manipulation) which creates new possibilities and actions without domination.
c. *Power with:* 'a sense of the whole being greater than the sum of the individuals, especially when a group tackles problems together'.
d. *Power from within:* 'the spiritual strength and uniqueness that resides in each one of us and makes true human. Its basis is self-acceptance and self-respect, which extend, in turn, to respect for and acceptance of others as equals.

Rawland have considered some of the different manifestations of power, we can return to the question of what is meant by empowerment. Using the conventional definition, of "power over" empowerment means bringing people who are outside the decision-making process into it. This puts a strong emphasis on participation in political structures and formal decision-making and, in the economic sphere, on the ability to obtain an income that enables participation in economic decision-making. Individuals are empowered when they are able to maximize the opportunities available to them without constraints.

Within the generative, 'power to' and "power with" interpretation of power, empowerment is concern with the processes by which people become aware of their own interests how those relate to the interest of others in order both to participate from a position of a greater strength in decision-making and actually to influence such decisions.

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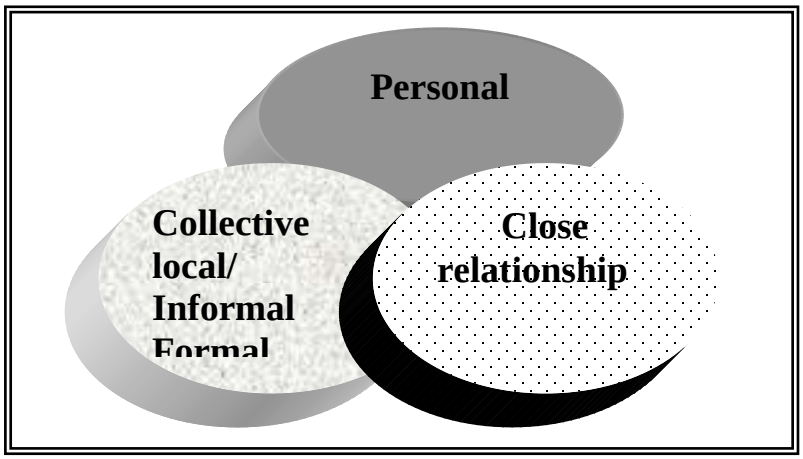
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From a feminist perspective, interpreting 'power over' entails understanding the dynamics of oppression and internalized oppressing. Empowerment is thus more than participation in decision-making; it must also include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions. As feminist and other social theorist have shown, societies ascribe a particular set of abilities to social categories of people. Empowerment must involve undoing negative social construction, so that people come to see themselves as having the capacity and the right to act and influence decisions [Rowland, (1997).

According to Rawland, empowerment to be operating within three dimensions:

a. *Personal :* development a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity, and undoing the defects of internalized oppression.
b. *Rational :* developing the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of a relationship and decisions made within it.
c. *Collective :* This includes involvement in political structures, but might also cover collective action based co-operation rather than competition.

## II. The Three Dimensions of Empowerment




(Rowlands, Jo (1997) Questioning Empowerment, Oxford: Oxfam.)

Naila Kabeer's (1989) interpretation : Kabeer interprets it as a redial transformation of power relations between women and men 'so that women have greater power over their own lives and men have less power over women's lives'. Kabeer (1994) has provided another dynamic account of empowerment. She regards empowerment as a concept with theoretical and practical potential that merits being more than an empty slogan.

She found it necessary to deconstruct the notion of power in order to consider empowerment. She explained: 'the multi-dimensional nature of power suggest that empowerment strategies for women must build on 'the power within' as a necessary adjunct to improving their ability to control resources, to determine agendas and make decisions. Power from within needs 'experiential recognition and analysis' of issues to do with women's own subordination and how it is maintained. 'Such power cannot be given; it has to be self-generated (Kabeer: 1994). She emphasizes the importance of such elements as self-respect, and the sense of agency. Careful analysis and insightful reflections are necessary preconditions for creation of new form of consciousness. This idea is based on Paulo Freire's conception of `critical consciousness' where the process of empowerment is bound up with an educational process (Naz :2006).

In addition, Kabeer (1994) belief's that `self esteem and feeling of being as active agent' are the fundamental principles of empowerment and she expends her thought by saying that `empowerment should be considered aspect of perceiving oneself as an active agent capable of making decisions' (Naz;2006).

Thus, it is not simply an act of decision making but encompasses more. Kabeer does not ignore the value of collective action but considers it useful in achieving social as well as political empowerment. In her opinion, the empowerment process should have its effect in policy changes at the state and market institutions level that ultimately mould and limit women's live(Naz :2006).

John Friedman's (1992) view : Friedman's (1992: 32-34) theory of `alternative development' is derived from the concept of empowerment that arises from indigenous, political and social cultures of society. According to Friedman, There are three kinds of power, social, political and psychological. Social power consists in processing knowledge, information and skills. Political power is a mechanism that influences policy changes both at the micro and macro level. It's the result of the power of voice and collective action.



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Finally, psychological power is expressed as an individual sense of potency demonstrated in self-confidence behaviour, self-reliance and increased self-esteem. Friedman explains empowerment as social power, which can be translated into political power. Social networking enhances their position and power, which consequently expedites and strengthens the process of psychological, social and political empowerment.

According to kate Young (1993), empowerment enables women`to take control of their own lives, set their own agenda, organize to help each other and make demands on the state for support and on the society itself for change'.

As Young, empowerment is a complete change of the processes and structures responsible for women's inferior status in the society. It is based on a `transformatory potential' related to the `need to transform women's position in such a way that the advancement will be sustained. Finally, she summarizes the concept of empowerment from individual to wider political perspectives and she puts sufficient importance to collective action, as it is a sure means to individual empowerment.

In true sense, this term is discussed as feminist perspective, and Marilee Karl (1995) says, 'The word 'Empowerment' captures this sense of gaining control, of participation in decision-making. More recently, the word has entered the vocabulary of development agencies, including international organizations and the United Nations'. And Vanessa Griffen (1987) explains it also through gender lens, as her, empowerment means.

- having control, or gaining further control;
- having a say and being listened to;
- being able to define and create from a women's perspective;being able to influence social choices and decisions affecting the whole society (not just areas of society accepted as women's place)
- being recognized and respected as equal citizens and human beings with a contribution to make.

And again Beteille (1999:591), discusses it as power distribution without having clear power. According to berteile, 'the main point behind empowerment is that it seeks to change society through a rearrangement of power'.

It reflects the kabeer's opinion. But, Dandikar (1986:26) has described empowerment as a multifaceted process, which involves four parallel aspects. These are:

- The women's economic/resource base;
- The public/political arena allowed to her by society;
- Her family structure, and the strength and limitations it imposes on her; and
- Perhaps most important, the psychological / ideological "sense" about women in her society, which in turn shapes her own perception of herself and the options she allows herself to consider.

When we observes S. Batliwala (1993) observation, where she says the word "power" is contained within the term empowerment implying that empowerment is about changing the balance of power in a given society, power being defined as control over resources and ideology. The resources may be categorized into physical, human, intellectual, financial, and self, including self-esteem, confidence, and creativity. Ideology refers to beliefs, values, attitudes, and ways of thinking and perceiving situations. She point out that empowerment is a process that involves a redistribution of power, particularly within the household.

So power, power redistribution and power relationship are emphasized by the modern scholars when they have made clarification.

Regarding empowerment, Hashemi et el (1993) have clarified it in a study 'Targeted Credit Programs and the Empowerment of Women in Rural Bangladesh' and emphasized on women control over on her lives. They have identified six general domains in which, traditionally subordination of women is played out and in which empowerment of women is believed to be taking place. The six domains are: 1.Sense of self and vision of a future. 2. Mobility and visibility. 3. Ability to earn a living. 4. Decision-making power within the household. 5. Ability to interact effectively in the public sphere. 5. Participation in non- family groups. In another study of 'Rural Credit Programs and Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh' Syed Hashemi et al (1996) have developed eight empowerment indicators to measure women's empowerment especially for Bangladesh context as a developing country. And his conceptualisation is highly praised in women development area. The eight indicators are: a. Mobility b. Economic security c. Ability to make small purchases d. Ability to make larger purchases e. Involvement in major decisions f. Relative freedom from domination by the family g. Political and legal awareness h. Participation in public protests and political campaigning.

And once it has found, scholars has analyses empowerment through gender lens and establish it for judging women development. Though it is very difficult to differentiate real boarder line between development and empowerment. It has also found in Chen and Mahmud's (1995) clarification when they have conceptualized also empowerment as women's advancement. As Chen and Mahmud (1995)

Empowerment is a process of positive change that improves women's fallback position and bargaining power within a patriarchal structure, and identify different causal pathways of change; material, cognitive, perceptual and relational.

In short, empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation, to greater decision-making power and control, and to transformative action. In addition, empowerment is a process that is both individual and



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collective. Sometimes it involve people as groups that most often begin to develop their awareness and the ability to organize to take action and bring about change.

## III. Alternative Thought as Beyond

Today, when empowerment approach is reigning supreme, there is need for a cool and dispassionate scrutiny of some of its infirmities. In the interest of systematic scrutiny, I explain it through liberal, structural and cultural perspectives.

Viewed from liberal perspective, women's empowerment approach suffers from three fallacies: exclusionary bias, adversarial orientation and subversive logic (Sharma: 2000:21). It suffers from an exclusionary bias in that it excludes man from the feminist discourse, organisation and movement. It is noticed, it isolates women from men. This is evident from the fact that, by and large most of the women study centres are headed by women and all the seminars and conferences on women are monopolised by women. Even, most of women mobilisations are led by women. Not only that; women academicians invariably claim, gender studies as one of their field of specialisation. As a result, the academic discourse on the gender question seems to have gained an activist impulse. Within the academic discourse again the women question is being viewed in isolation from the gender relations context. A disconnecting consequence of it, all the alienation of men from the gender discourse. As if this were not enough, it also evinces an adversarial orientation. Simply, it tends to project man as an adversary of woman (Sharma;2000:25).

In its present discourse, women's empowerment perspective could also be a threat to domestic peace as it may drive a wedge between man and woman. That is the reason why many women do not favour this perspective; because they feel they are well adjusted and find nothing wrong with gender relations.

From structural view point, women's empowerment approach is intrinsically psychologistic, structural and elitist (Sharma: 2000-26). It is psychologistic in that sense; it places over optimism on the efficacy of conscientization as a key to women's empowerment. Even as the importance of `awareness generation' among women for their empowerment cannot be overemphasised, conscientization of women alone, to the exclusion of man is as important, perhaps even more than change in the attitude of woman, for setting gender relations on an even keel. Above all, while attitudinal change among both women and men is a necessary condition for gender equality, it is, however, not a sufficient condition. From Marxist angle, women's empowerment framework suffers from a sort of non-structuralist conditions. That is so because it ignores the importance of existential conditions, including the fact of economic dependency of woman on man. The economic dependency of woman is built into the structure of property relations which are dominated by man. For sure, developmental approach has failed to make a dent into the structure of gender-based property relations.

From structural viewpoint, another problem with women's empowerment is that it treats women as a homogeneous category, an undifferentiated mass. This, however, is not true. The fact of the matter is that there is internal differentiation among women and it is as telling as between man and woman (Sharma: ibid). These women differ significantly not only in their backgrounds but also in their needs and interests. The question, then, is; whose empowerment are we talking about? Empowerment of women of which section or class? It is no secret that movement for women's empowerment has been hijacked ny women of higher strata, particularly upper class/middle class and power elites (Caplan: 1985).

From cultural perspectives, women's empowerment approach can be criticised for its marked Western ethnocentrism (Sharma: ibid). It has incapability to relate to the cultural ethos of the countries of the East, including Indian Subcontinent. Its most severe limitation is its Western ethnocentric bias. So mired it is in the Western feminist discourse that it fails to capture the cultural reality of gender relations in the non-western pert of the world.

In view of the above delineated limitations of women's empowerment approach it needs gender empowerment. Where it fails also to identify male's empowerment because most male of Third World Countries have no power and they are also exploited by the existing power-structure in the society. So it needs also to define empowerment as a gender-neutral concept. At this point, it is necessary to clarify the concept of `gender empowerment'. Gender empowerment should not be mistaken for empowerment of man vis-a-vis woman or the vice versa. It signifies transformation of gender relations from hierarchal to egalitarian plan rather than just tinkering with women's power position. It aims at reworking of gender relations in a complimentary framework rather than a conflictual framework. Gender empowerment is a broad category which includes empowerment of women without creating a misgiving of emasculation of men. It stands for fostering a balance in gender relations as against the one-sided women empowerment approach. Furthermore, empowerment is not just a question of rearrangement of power both economic and political; it is also a matter of change of values. In my view, men need gender sensitisation as much as women do. In fact men need it even more, for they still are in a position of domination on account of the perpetuation of patriarchy.



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