

The Issues and Aspects of Women Empowerment: Feministic Perspectives

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Abstract

This article attempts to draw on the conceptual understanding of women empowerment primarily focusing on its major aspects. Empowerment enables women to acquire knowledge, skills, and techniques which will help them in their personal and social growth as well as foster their sensitivity towards problems in society. Women Empowerment refers to the creation of an environment for women where they can make decisions of their own for their benefit as well as for society. The issues of women and their empowerment are explored and interpreted using qualitative methodology highlighting feminism as a critical approach. Employing both description and content analysis as major methodological tools, the writer discusses on the social, economic, cultural, educational, political, and psychological aspects of women empowerment from feministic perspectives with an aim to familiarize the women with the basic concepts of empowerment so that it can help them increase and improve their strength in these various domains and build up confidence to create a just society based on equality, freedom and justice.

Keywords: Women empowerment, feminism, gender equality, patriarchy, justice

Introduction

Women's Empowerment is an issue of great significance from the modern perspective. The feminist movement that first raised the need for women's empowerment started in the 1800s when women demanded their right to vote in Britain. Since then, there have been two more waves of the feminist movement on a global basis. Empowerment is defined as a process that women can transform their self-perceptions equivalent to the alchemy of obviously transforming gender roles. Empowerment and development are closely related. Empowerment leads to development. It is giving lawful power or authority to act. Women, all over the world, have been challenging and changing inequalities since the beginning of history. These struggles have been supported by men who have been impaired at injustices against women and society. Empowerment of women refers to giving decision making power to women in the social, economic, and political sphere of

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life. The empowerment of women is very much essential to achieve sustainable development. It is prerequisite to gender equality and development.

The term 'women empowerment' has different connotation which depends on social, economic, and political context in which it is used. World Bank (2001) defines it as “the expansion of the freedom of choices and action, which could increase women authority and control over resources and decision regarding their life.” Similarly, women empowerment is a process through which women achieve the ability to control, to take ownership over resources and make strategies of life choices (Kabeer 2001). However, the process itself depends on women, through education, capacity building, skills and training and changes in legal and structural framework. Women empowerment covers many dimensions including social, economic, cultural, political, legal and psychological (Malhotra et al. 2002).

World Bank (2017) defines “empowerment as the process of increasing the authority and responsibility of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes”. For Kate Young (1993), empowerment enables women to take control of their own lives, set their agenda, organize to help each other, and make demands on the state for support and on the society itself for change. Similarly, empowerment is a process, which helps people to gain control of their lives through raising awareness, taking action, and working to exercise greater control. It is the feeling that activates the psychological energy to accomplish one's goals (Indiresan, 1999).

Many women are still the victims of male domination in the society. To suffer the harsh realities of domestic violence, gender discrimination, physical, psychological and sexual exploitations, insult and harassment is the way of their life. They are considered inferior, weak, submissive, irrational, and treated as second sex. The subjugated women cannot enjoy freedom, equality and justice like their male counterparts in the society. In other words, they are the victims of patriarchy and its programming. Lois Tyson (2015), a famous writer and critic, defines patriarchy as “any culture that privileges men by promoting traditional gender roles” (p. 81). In its simplest terms, patriarchy is a system of society or government in which men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it. "Patriarchy is a social system in which men hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property" (Patriarchy, July 7, 2021). A patriarchal woman is “a woman who has internalized the norms and values of patriarchy” (Tyson, 2015, p. 87). For her, patriarchy is sexist, that is, it promotes the belief that women are innately inferior to men. Women are oppressed by patriarchy economically, politically, socially, and psychologically; patriarchal ideology is the primary means by which they are kept so. In every domain where patriarchy reigns, woman is other: she is

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objectified and marginalized, defined only by her difference from male norms and values, defined by what she allegedly lacks and that men allegedly have.

Patriarchy assigns specific gender roles to both men and women. Through these gender roles women are programmed to see or to be blind at inequalities. Shedding light on the role of these gender roles Tyson (2015) says:

Traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive. These gender roles have been used very successfully to justify inequities, which still occur today, such as excluding women from equal access to leadership and decision-making positions (in the family as well as in politics, academia, and the corporate world), paying men higher wages than women for doing the same job (if women are even able to obtain the job), and convincing women that they are not fit for careers in such areas as mathematics and engineering. (p. 81)

Patriarchy continually exerts forces that undermine women's self-confidence and assertiveness, then points to the absence of these qualities as proof that women are naturally and therefore correctly, self-effacing and submissive. Patriarchy as an ideology programs both men and women socially in such a way that women often cannot see the ways in which they are oppressed by traditional gender roles.

It is the tragedy of our society though men and women are considered the two wheels of the same cart, the women are treated unequally in different spheres of life. They cannot enjoy equal rights, freedom and justice as their male counterparts do. The impacts of patriarchy on women are multifarious, and women's issues have become more complex today. Despite several social movements and transformations, there are no fundamental changes in women's life. In every domain where patriarchy reigns, woman is still considered other: she is objectified, marginalized and defined in terms of male norms and values. So, obviously, women as of today are not treated equally as their male counterparts; the patriarchal roles given to them are biased, discriminatory, and unjust in several sectors. The main purpose of this research paper is to clarify the basic concept of women empowerment and its social, economic, cultural, educational, political, and psychological aspects so that women can empower themselves and become conscious to fight the challenges and discrimination against them in different domains and create a just society.

Social Empowerment

Women's social life is covered by many kinds of discrimination. Women in social life suffer from many daily-life appellations, especially in the Middle East other than the West. In the Middle East women are classified by their relationship status other than by their contribution to the community. While searching for life partner men get "repelled" from divorced women. In the process of searching,

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most of the men search for virgin girls whether those men have a previous relationship or not. Divorced women are treated differently than married women. Whereas single mothers most of the time do not marry after their first marriage because men do not want extra burden or responsibility. On the other hand, single-fathers easily can get married most of the time as there is no social norm against them to re-marry. Single mothers do not refuse to marry, however, they are refuted by the men how are seeking marriage. “Divorce is more costly for women than men. The most common impact of divorce on women is the financial insecurity it creates, increasing the possibility of poverty for them and their children. Data show that after divorce, women experience a 73 percent loss in their former standard of living and men experience a 42 percent rise” (Headlee & Elfin, 1996, p.52). Not only does divorce leave women socially “downgraded” it also leaves her in economical insecurity, and if a woman is supporting a child the disaster will be doubled. According to Clarke-Stewart & Brentano (2006) divorced women make only five new friends in the first year of divorce due to the emotional damage of divorce (p. 70). Women are more likely to have a blighted social life than men after divorce. Nevertheless, society does not welcome divorcees leaving women in a dark corner of society.

Social empowerment is understood as the process of developing a sense of autonomy and self-confidence, and acting individually and collectively to change social relationships and the institutions and discourses that exclude poor people and keep them in poverty. Poor people's empowerment, and their ability to hold others to account, is strongly influenced by their assets (such as land, housing, livestock, savings) and capabilities of all types: human (such as good health and education), social (such as social belonging, a sense of identity, leadership relations) and psychological (self-esteem, self-confidence, the ability to imagine and aspire to a better future). Also important are people's collective assets and capabilities, such as voice, organization, representation, and identity. Poor people's involvement in local associations and inter-community cooperation mechanisms can contribute to social empowerment by improving their skills, knowledge, and self-perception. Local associations also act as self-help mechanisms through which poor people organize their economic activities, such as farming cooperatives, or microfinance groups.

It is also important to recognize that associational life at the local level takes place predominantly within the informal sphere, such as religious organizations, traditional and customary institutions, and informal community-based groups. It is these organizations that exert the most influence on poor people's lives. Vulnerable groups, such as the very poor, women, and marginalized communities can often lack the skills and confidence to engage in community decision-making. It may therefore be important to support mechanisms designed to specifically target marginalized groups to ensure that they can participate. It is argued that

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participation in local associations can empower poor people to engage in public politics and collective action through building individual and collective capacities is a long-term process.

Economic Empowerment

Women's economic empowerment is central to realizing women's rights and gender equality. Women's economic empowerment includes women's ability to participate equally in existing markets; their access to and control over productive resources, access to decent work, control over their own time, lives, and bodies; and increased voice, agency, and meaningful participation in economic decision-making at all levels from the household to international institutions. Women's economic empowerment boosts productivity, increases economic diversification and income equality in addition to other positive development outcomes. For example, increasing the female employment rates in OECD countries to match that of Sweden, could boost GDP by over USD 6 trillion, recognizing, however, that growth does not automatically lead to a reduction in gender-based inequality. Conversely, it is estimated that gender gaps cost the economy some 15 percent of GDP.

Economic empowerment is thought to allow poor people to think beyond immediate daily survival and to exercise greater control over both their resources and life choices. For example, it enables households to make their own decisions around making investments in health and education and taking risks to increase their income. There is also some evidence that economic empowerment can strengthen vulnerable groups' participation in decision-making. For example, microfinance programs have been shown to bolster women's influence within the household and marketplace. The evidence also suggests that economic power is often easily 'converted' into increased social status or decision-making power (GSDRC, 2014).

The economic component of empowerment requires that women be able to engage in a productive activity that will allow them some degree of financial autonomy of empowerment entails the ability to analyze the surrounding environment in political and social terms; it also means the ability to organize and mobilize for social change. In consequence, an empowerment process must involve individual awareness, and collective action is fundamental to the aim of attaining social transformation.

Investing in women's economic empowerment sets a direct path towards gender equality, poverty eradication, and inclusive economic growth. Women make enormous contributions to economies, whether in businesses, on farms, as entrepreneurs or employees, or by doing unpaid care work at home. But they also remain disproportionately affected by poverty, discrimination, and exploitation. Gender discrimination means women often end up in insecure, low-wage jobs,

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and constitute a small minority of those in senior positions. It curtails access to economic assets such as land and loans. It limits participation in shaping economic and social policies. And, because women perform the bulk of household works, they often have little time left to pursue economic opportunities.

UN Women supports women's economic empowerment in line with these, and with the growing body of evidence that shows that gender equality significantly contributes to advancing economies and sustainable development. In all our economic empowerment programs, UN women reach out to women most in need, often by engaging with grassroots and civil society organizations. Particularly marginalized groups include rural women, domestic workers, some migrants, and low-skilled women. Our aims are higher incomes, better access to and control over resources, and greater security, including protection from violence.

Women's Economic Empowerment is a key priority within the Feminist International Forum. Around the world, women consistently earn less than men and are trapped in the lowest paid and least secure jobs, which rarely provide formal workplace protections or social security. They also experience multiple and intersecting disadvantages due to, for instance, their race, class, or religion, and are especially vulnerable to gender-based violence at home and in the workplace. Fundamentally, gender inequality and economic inequality are inextricably linked. Feminists are calling for new economic models that work for everyone, not just the rich. Unless we tackle gender inequality and economic inequality simultaneously, women's economic empowerment (WEE) will be impossible to realize. This means, efforts to support WEE through the programming of international assistance, for example, must address the social norms, laws and economic policies, and structural barriers that restrict women's choices and opportunities. So, this must start with focused attention on neglected areas of WEE, including economic rights and legal frameworks, labor rights and decent work, the care economy, and the links between gender-based violence and WEE.

Cultural Empowerment

Culture perception is the ideas of the people how they perceive things and events according to their societal setup. Culture can shape our view of the world. People from different cultures see and perceive things differently and that is probably due to how their culture shaped the way they view the world. The cultural perception of women's empowerment is mostly dependent upon their cultural and societal values and norms. Mostly in many cultures, women are treated in a very inhuman manner. They are treated like animals having no power in any part of life depending on the males of the family society.

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Women's equal and full participation in decision-making is extremely important for good governance, poverty alleviation, and equitable human resource development in developing countries. Women empowerment is a dynamic process in which well-planned social change by-product of which is empowerment women with education comes employment and with this comes economic freedom (Busch & Valentine...). In many traditional societies, especially in South Asia, the charge of women's life is in the hands of others. In Pakistan, dominated social system is Patriarchal due to which at every place and every stage women have no right to make decisions.

Educational Empowerment

The economic component of empowerment requires that women be able to engage in academic activities. Education is important for everyone, but it is a critical area of empowerment for girls and women. This is not only because education is an entry point to opportunity but also because women's educational achievements have positive ripple effects within the family and across generations. Empowerment means moving from enforced powerlessness to a position of power. Education is an essential means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills, and self-confidence necessary to fully participate in the development process. Education is the key factor for women's empowerment, prosperity, development, and welfare. Discrimination of women from womb to tomb is well known. There is continued inequality and vulnerability of women in all sectors and they are oppressed in all spheres of life. So they need to be empowered in all walks of life. To fight against socially constructed gender biases, women have to swim against the system that requires more strength. Such strength comes from the process of empowerment and empowerment will come from education. And rural development will come from women empowerment.

One of the biggest problems in Nepal's education system is female education. This issue has been neglected since the 1950s. There is extreme inequality in the literacy rate between men and women. In Nepal, 71 percent of men can read and write, whereas only 44 percent of women can. This is a staggering inequality for women's education and is a direct link to areas of poverty in Nepal.

Another issue concerning women's education is that parents do not have enough money to ensure their children have access to proper education. The issue of poverty is taking a toll on Nepal's education system. The public school scores are very low; in 2013, 72 percent of students from those schools failed their exit exams. This leaves 335,912 public school students with no access to a future or hope in achieving their dreams. Furthermore, statistics provided by the Teach for Nepal foundation, which is aimed at giving these students access to educational

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resources, stated that 85 percent of first-graders will drop out of the school system and 25 percent of the students left cannot count to double digits.

Political Empowerment

Politically, women suffer a great impact from discrimination. Women have been discriminated in the political arena, as society gives women politicians less credibility than men due to some ideas stuck in the minds that women are more likely to be secretaries other than being the boss. The media has a huge impact on such negative ideas, giving the women always as the soft secretary that has a model body shape and a voice that rhymes with music. For example; According to Abdel-Wahab's film, he sketched a wife being a CEO in a governmental institution, while the employees of that institution do not believe that a woman can hold such a sophisticated position (1966). In that film, the female CEO proves to her husband and to her employees at the end of the film that she is as competent as any male CEO that has ever held this position. This is the kind of media that needed to be seen today, not the ones that weaken the image of women and strengthens the stereotyping of them in politics and the workplace. According to Constance B. Morella, a US Republican Congresswoman, who represents the Seventh District in Maryland, in politics (once elected) there is equity in terms of salary, but not in terms of leadership. Women are excluded from many issue areas and commissions where they might serve" as cited in (Headlee & Elfin, 1996).

Moser (1989) says that the empowerment approach to development that grew out of "emergent feminist writings and grass-roots organization experience of Third World women" (p. 1815). He defines power "as the right to determine choices in life and to influence the direction of change through the ability to gain control over crucial material and non-material resources" (p. 1815). In other words, according to this definition, power refers to an individual's ability to make choices. Empowerment, then, concerns the processes by which a person denied the ability (and power) to make choices acquires that ability (and power) (Kabeer, 2001).

In the US congress, the government cannot give smaller salaries to women, "of course" or it would be contradicting its policies out in the public, nonetheless, they do not give women the right of leadership as they might provide help to their country, the US- her country- deny the women's help in leadership. Unlike men, women pursue politics for the sake of issues and morals, not for career advancement. The rejection of women being in the political arena allowed them to be more active volunteers than men, which gave them more than enough experience to successfully enter the political arena (Headlee & Elfin, 1996, p. 26). Men do not have an extra brain that makes them excel in politics and likely women do not, hence, they are equal and should have equal political opportunities. Women went to work thus, affecting the men's jobs and the

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economy mainly because of money. Women worked because they did not have husbands as unmarried or divorced, or they had husbands who were in low-pay jobs. In 1994, 59 percent of married women were working for pay which increased by 19 percent from 1970 (Headlee & Elfin, 1996, p. 3). As for discrimination in the workplace, statistically, “pregnant women suffer widespread discrimination at work, figures show, with almost one in 14 mums-to-be denied opportunities for promotion and one in 50 demoted” (Pregnant Women; Discrimination at work, 2006). Pregnant women take the largest piece in the pie chart according to discrimination, some of the pregnant women do not even get paid for maternity leave, while, some of them do not get promoted and some get demoted. (Info: 1865 words (7 pages) Essay Published: 27th Apr 2018 in Anthropology, UK Essays....)

Women’s political empowerment is increasingly recognized as critical to modern states. The recommendations and declarations of a wide range of international bodies—led primarily by the United Nations, but including the Inter-Parliamentary Union, African Union, Southern African Development Community, Commonwealth, Council of Europe, European Union, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and Organization of American States—urge member [1]states to achieve a minimum of 30 percent women in all elected positions (Krook 2006, p. 114, Towns 2010). And, given the inclusion of women’s political representation in one of the Millennium Development Goals, women’s political empowerment is now a high-priority issue in international development cooperation (Mosedale, 2014). In policy statements such as the Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), there is a dual focus: First, that women’s empowerment is an intrinsic goal in itself and second, that it may bring about other processes of prosperity (Malhotra et al., 2002). Scholars and practitioners alike see a link between women’s political empowerment and outcomes for women, for children, and for society as a whole (e.g. Sen 1997, Bratton and Ray 2002, Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004, Gerrity, Osborn, and Mendez 2007, Swiss et al. 2012, Beaman et al. 2012).

Women’s political empowerment is the arena for societal decision-making. Individuals who hold formal and official positions in government allocate scarce resources, e.g., tax revenues, and direct resources to some groups at the expense of others (Bratton and Ray 2002, Franceshet and Piscopo 2014). Decisions by politicians affect people’s individual choices by encouraging some behaviors and outlawing others. To hold a political position is to hold a position of authority. Yet, not all decision-making takes place in elite spheres of society. Those with formal or informal political power hold power over other social institutions, such as the family or education, and can codify particular practices into law (Martin 2004). Political elites have the power to enforce their decisions, sometimes with

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force. Therefore, looking at the makeup of individuals in formal positions of power and important positions in civil society highlights who is legitimated to make society-wide decisions in that society.

For example; *Mahatma Gandhi* encouraged women to participate in all aspects and phases of nationalist activities, particularly in the production program and the non-violent Satyagraha, for it required no physical strength but moral courage and spiritual determination. Thus the nationalist movement was, for Mahatma Gandhi, not merely a political struggle but a means of regenerating and rejuvenating the society. It was Mahatma Gandhi who gave a new direction, strength, and inspiration to the freedom movement. He played a key role in extending women's lively participation in political life through the national movement.

Psychological Empowerment

Empowerment is a process by which persons lacking access to material and social resources gain greater access and control over those resources and improve their life circumstances (WHO, 2010). Psychological empowerment occurs when a person is enabled to participate in decisions affecting him or her and to exercise some---even limited---control over life choices. It is generally recognized---supported by psychological and other social science research---that empowerment is essential to progress and stability in national development. There is a great cultural and environmental diversity among the communities in which rural women and girls live. These communities have much in common but also have unique characteristics. Rural women with disabilities are probably the most disempowered of all rural women because they face discrimination, poverty, and related societal risks and are often ignored in policy planning. Therefore, empowerment efforts that target rural women and girls have to be culturally and demographically relevant to the communities they serve to be Effective.

The psychosocial empowerment of rural women and girls---including women and girls with disabilities---involves three steps(Zimmerman,2000). First, psychological distress must be reduced and participation in economic and social activities encouraged. Second, isolation must also be reduced by developing social relationships and networks. Finally, women's rights to participate in social and economic decision-making at all levels should be supported. The recognition that rural women have rights to ownership and participation in economic decisions is critical to their successful empowerment. A psychosocial approach to empowerment promotes rural women's and girls' recognition and development of their human rights and their strengths and provides resources and skills. Rural women---even while living in extreme poverty and suffering gender disparities and traditional role restrictions---play a critical role in the family, food security, and survival. They also enhance agricultural and rural development. Their vitality

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and resilience are protective factors to be nurtured because they provide psychological buffers helpful to avoiding and recovering from threats to their lives. Focusing on these strengths can serve as a basis for effective programs.

The psychological component would include “the development of feelings that women can act upon to improve their condition. This means the formation of the belief that they can succeed in change efforts”. The participation of women in business enables them to acquire inimitable psychological benefits to rise psychologically powerful which are essential for women empowerment in any socio-cultural and economic environment and situation. The members have accrued various psychological benefits including self-awareness, high self-esteem, self-confidence and courage, understanding about own rights, privileges, roles & responsibilities, power of self-determination, positive attitude, risk-taking ability, the power to face challenges of daily life, gaining knowledge and new ideas and skills, great relief from mental stress and anxiety, leading a happy and satisfied life and so on.

Conclusion

Women empowerment is a widely discussed term in today’s society and talks about the upliftment of the female gender. First, it is a long-term and revolutionary protest against discrimination based on sex and gender. Women empowerment refers to educating women and helping them build an identity of their own. In our patriarchal society, women are expected to mould themselves according to the wishes of the man who “feeds them.” They are not allowed to have an individual opinion or an independent identity. Empowering women involves encouraging them to be financially, culturally, and socially, politically, psychologically independent. A woman must be entitled to pursue what she loves and to develop into a fully functioning human. Her individuality must be nurtured and acknowledged. Women empowerment has lead millions of women across the globe to pursue their dreams. They are steadily moving forward in life with strong determination, respect, and faith.

Women’s empowerment begins with the act of considering women equal to men. The whole of feminist ideology revolves around the concept of establishing equality of all sexes. Discrimination against women has been so imminent in our society that we often fail to notice the subtle and latent forms of sexism. Women’s empowerment can only be brought about when women are made aware of their rights. Most girls grow up to believe that they are inferior to boys and, thus, surrender before the regressive and patriarchal structure of the society. Young girls must be taught that they are no less than boys and can achieve anything if they are determined to do so.

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