

Conceptualizing Women's Empowerment: Theoretical Parameters and their Interplays

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This paper begins from the understanding that women's empowerment is inescapably bound up with the condition of disempowerment. It is about a process of change by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such ability.

[**Keywords:** empowerment, women's empowerment, disempowerment, freedom and choice, agency, control of resources, inequality, coercion, conflict]

The concept of 'empowerment' is open to myriad of componential inclusions each mutually distinct, specific to context under use, although interrelated in a way that broadly indicates power connotation in terms of the ability to make strategic life choices. In other way round, to be disempowered, therefore, implies to be denied choice. But to my understanding, people who exercise a great deal of choice in their lives may be very powerful, but they are not empowered in the sense that they were not disempowered in the first place. This paper begins from the understanding that women's empowerment is inescapably bound up with the condition of disempowerment. It is about a process of change by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such ability.

First of all, 'choice' necessarily implies alternatives, the ability to have chosen otherwise. There is a logical connect between poverty and disempowerment because insufficiency of the means for meeting one's basic needs often rules out the ability to exercise meaningful choices. However when survival imperatives are no longer dominant, there is still the problem that not all choices are equally relevant to the definition of power. Some choices are primary survival choices like choices of livelihood, marriage, children, freedom of movements and choice of friends which in turn frame secondary choices, which may be important for quality of one's life but do not constitute its defining parameters. Empowerment thus refers to expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them.

Changes in the ability to exercise choice incorporates three inter-related dimensions: resources (which forms the condition under which choices are made); agency (which is at the heart of the process by which choices are made); and achievements (which are the outcomes of the choices). These dimensions are inter-dependent because changes in each contribute to, and benefits from changes in others. Thus achievements of a particular moment are translated into enhanced resource or agency and hence capacity for making choices, at a later moment in time.

Resource. Resource can be material, human or social. They refer not only to conventional economic resources such as land, equipment, finance, working capital etc. but also to various human and social resources which serve to enhance the ability to exercise choice. Human resources are embodied in the individual and encompass his/her knowledge, skills, creativity, imagination and so on. Social resources on the other hand are made up of claims, obligations and expectations which inhere in relationships, networks and connections which prevail in different sphere of life and which enable people to improve their situation and life chances beyond what would be possible through their individual efforts alone.

It's Distribution and Access. Resources are distributed through a variety of different institutions and processes and access to resources will be determined by rules, norms and practices which prevail in different institutional domains (e.g. familial norms, patron-client relationships, informal wage agreements, formal contractual transactions, public sector entitlements). These rules, norms and practices give some actors authority over others in determining principles of distribution and exchange within that space. The terms

on which people gain access to resources are as important as the resources themselves when the issue of empowerment is being considered. Access may be conditional on highly clientelist forms of dependency relationships or extremely exploitative conditions of work or it may be achieved in ways which offer dignity & sense of self-worth. Empowerment entails a change in terms on which resources are acquired as much as an increase in access to resources.

Agency. The second dimension of power relates to agency, the ability to define one's goals & act upon them. Agency is about more than observable action; it encompasses meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity or their quote-unquote '*sense of agency*' or '*the power within*'. While agency often can be operationalised as individual decision-making, it encompasses a much wider range of purposive actions, including bargaining, negotiation, deception, manipulation, subversion, resistance and protest as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis. Agency can have both positive and negative connotations, positive in 'power to' relation i.e. capacity to define their own life choices and pursue their own goals even against opposition from others and negative 'power over' relation i.e. capacity to override agency of others through violence, coercion and threat.

Resource and agency together constitute what Sen (1985) refers to as capabilities, the potential that people have for living the lives they want, of achieving valued ways of 'being and doing'. These realized achievements or the failure to do so, constitute our third dimension of power. But of course where valued ways of doing and being can be traced to laziness, incompetence or some other reason particular to an individual, then the issue of power is not relevant. When achievement failure reflects asymmetric distribution of capabilities, it can be considered as manifestation of disempowerment.

Difference vs. Inequality: Qualifying Choice

As far as empowerment is concerned, focus is on the possible inequalities in people's capacity to make choices rather than differences in the choices they make. An observed lack of uniformity in functioning achievements cannot be automatically interpreted as evidence of inequality because it is highly unlikely that all members of a given society will give equal value to different possible ways of 'being and doing' although there are certain universally-shared functioning achievements that relate to basic fundamentals of survival and well-being like proper nourishment, good health, adequate shelter, reasonable clothing and clean water and so on. If there are systematic gender differences in these basic functioning achievements, they can be taken as evidence of inequalities in underlying capabilities rather than differences in preferences. Inequalities in basic functioning generally tend to occur in situations of extreme scarcity. Confining gender inequality to achievements alone serves to convey the impression that women's disempowerment is largely a matter of poverty. This can be misleading for two reasons: On one hand it misses forms of gender-disadvantage characteristic of better-off sections of society. According to Razavi (1992), prosperity may reduce gender inequalities in basic well-being but intensify other social restrictions on women's ability to make choices.

On the other hand, it misses out on those dimensions of gender disadvantage among the poor which do not take the form of basic functioning failures. For instance marked gender differentials in life expectancy and children's nutrition, two widely used indicators in basic well-being, do not appear to be wide spread in the context of sub-Saharan Africa as they do in South Asia due to greater economic contribution of women in former rather than later. But still this does not rule out the possibility of other forms of gender disadvantage that can occur within the same context. Shaffer (1998) found little evidence of income or consumption disadvantage between male and female headed families in Guinea. But his study revealed women's far heavier workloads as well as male domination in private and public decision-making as manifestations of gender inequality within their community.

Qualifying 'choosing not to choose'

In situations of striking gender inequalities in basic well-being, choice-power couplet would suggest either an absence of choice on part of women as subordinate group or as active discrimination by men as dominant group. However picture becomes nebulous when forms of gender inequality appear to have been chosen by women themselves. Naila Kabir (1999) claimed that women's internalized acceptance of their secondary claims, as persons of lesser value can have adverse implications for their own well-being as well as for other female members of the family. For example, secondary claims on household resources, assent to marital

violence, willingness to bear children at the cost of their own health, agreement to reproductive choices prioritized by husband, discriminating daughters in the allocation of food and basic health care, promotion of female circumcision, oppressive authority by mother-in-laws and so on. Therefore power and dominance can operate through consent and complicity as well as through coercion and conflict. One way of conceptualizing this deeper reality is to be found in Bourdieu's concept of 'Doxa' which refers to traditions and beliefs that exist beyond discourse or argumentation, 'undiscussed, unnamed, admitted without argument or scrutiny' (Bourdieu 1977). To Bourdieu (1997), as long as subjective assessments of social actors are largely congruent with the objectively organized possibilities available to them, the world of 'doxa' remains intact. The passage from 'doxa' to discourse, a more critical consciousness, only becomes possible when competing ways of 'being and doing' become available as cultural possibilities so that quote-unquote 'common sense cultural propositions' begin to lose their quote-unquote 'naturalized' character. Therefore the likelihood that power flows and operates not only through constraints on people's choices but also through their values catalyzing those choices, appear to pose a serious challenge to the basic matrix between power and choice discussed in this paper.

Qualifications regarding choice, addresses distinction between choices from vantage alternatives and choices which reflect their absence. These qualifications incorporate structural dimensions into our analysis. Structures operate through rules, norms and practices of different institutions to determine resource, agency and achievement possibilities available to different groups of individuals in society. However actions and choices of individuals and groups can in turn act on structural constraints, reinforcing, modifying and transforming them.

It can reflect change at **individual** and **group level**, in their sense of self hood and identity, in how they perceive their interest and act upon them; in the **intermediate level**, in the rules and relationships which prevail in the personal, social, economic and political spheres of life and **deeper** hidden structures of which shape the distribution of resources and power in society and reproduce it over time. Therefore for any change to translate into meaningful and sustainable processes of empowerment, it must ultimately encompass both individual and structural levels.

Levels of Empowerment

Deeper levels: Structural relations of class/caste/gender; Intermediate levels: Institutional rules and resources; immediate levels: Individual resources, agency & achievements.

Measuring 'resources'. There is a widespread tendency in empowerment literature to talk about 'access to resources' in a generic way. 'Resource' dimension has to be defined in ways which spell out their potential for human agency and valued achievements more clearly than simple 'access' indicators of empowerment. Among Hindus joint family property is generally held in coparcenaries by men usually fathers and sons to the total exclusion of women (Mukhopadhyay 1998). Muslim men tend to inherit twice the share of women. After Independence Hindu law has been reformed to equal rights of inheritance for men & women. Muslim inheritance principles have been left almost untouched. But in actual practice as literature suggests Muslim and Hindu women tend to be treated as effectively propertyless. Therefore there is a need to go beyond simple 'access' indicators in order to grasp how 'resources' translate into realization of choice. One such overly used concept is 'control' in relation to resource in question. Sathar and Kazi's (1997) measure of 'access to resources' is based on whether women had a say in household expenses while 'control over resources' has an additional ownership component either by inheritance or by earning attached to it in addition to say in household expenditure.

Measuring 'agency'. Measuring agency in relation to women's empowerment is attributed to 'decision making'. Such measures are based on responses to questions asking women about their roles in relation to specific decisions. Such decision making varies across culture and are not equally persuasive as indicators of women's empowerment because they do not all have same consequential significance to women's lives. Moreover we find a hierarchy of decision-making recognized by family and community which reserves certain key areas for men as household heads and others for women in the family. For example in South Asia, purchase of food and other items of household and decisions regarding children's health fall within women's

arena while decisions regarding market transactions in major assets tend to be clearly 'male'. An illustrative table by Sathar and Kazi (1997) citing case of Pakistan is given as: Women's response:

Purchase of food: both (71 per cent) women herself (51 per cent); Number of children: both (65 per cent) women herself (16 per cent); Schooling of children: both (53 per cent) women herself (17 per cent); Marriage of children: both (52 per cent) women herself (8 per cent).

Measuring 'achievement'. In situations of gender discrimination, evidence that enhancement of women's agency led to reduction in prevailing gender inequalities in functioning achievements can be taken as an evidence of women's empowerment. A distinction is there between achievements which testify women's greater efficacy as agents within prescribed gender roles and those that indicate women as agents of transformation have been given by Dreze and Sen (1995).

They found that female literacy reduced under-five child mortality whereas female literacy and female labour force participation reduce excess of under-five female mortality. The later is taken as transforming in agency's part because it represented an increase in survival chances of the girl child and it also suggests that if they have education and are economically active they can give a better equalitarian focus on both boys and girls.

Conclusion

What the discussion has thrown up clearly is that it is not possible to establish the meaning of an indicator, the dimension of empowerment it is intending to measure, without reference to other dimensions of empowerment. Specifying 'access' to a resource tells us about potential rather than actual choice and the validity of a 'resource' largely rests on the validity of a potential 'agency' or entitlement embodied in that resource.

It is similarly difficult to judge the validity of an achievement measure unless we have evidence or can make a reasonable guess as to whose 'agency' was involved and the extent to which achievement transformed prevailing inequalities in resources and agency rather than reinforcing them or leaving them unchallenged. We have to similarly adjudicate agency's consequential significance in terms of women's strategic life choices, their ability to realize valued ways of 'being' and 'doing' and the extent to which agency transforms conditions under which it is exercised. In other words, the three dimensions are indivisible in determining the meaning of an indicator and hence its validity as a measure of empowerment.

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