

Women Empowerment : A Conceptual Debate

Abstract

Women empowerment becomes an important issue because women lack power. At the core of empowerment is the idea of power. Since power is created in relationships, power and power-relations can change. Women empowerment is the medium to achieve gender equality which implies a society in which men and women enjoy equal opportunities in all spheres of life. It focusses on identifying and redressing power imbalances and giving women more autonomy in life. This was also the main concern of feminist movement. There are different theoretical families within feminism namely liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, radical feminism etc. However, aim of all these theoretical schools was improving the condition of women in society through empowerment.

Keywords: Empowerment, Feminism, Gender equality.

Introduction

Women empowerment becomes an important issue because women lack power. At the core of empowerment is the idea of power. Since power is created in relationship, power and power-relations can change. Empowerment thus, becomes a meaningful concept as a process which leads to change. The concept of empowerment also depends upon power that can expand. This is unlike Weber's understanding of power which implies that those who hold power do so at the expense of others. It suggests that there is a fixed amount of power and therefore, if some hold power, others do not. This view is sometimes known as a 'constant-sum' concept of power. Since the amount of power is constant, power is held by an individual or group to the extent that it is not held by others. (Haralombus & Heald 1980 : 99).

Another viewpoint is variable-sum concept of power. Parsons was the chief exponent of this viewpoint. According to him power lies in the society as a whole. He argues the greater the efficiency of a social system for achieving the goals defined by its members, the more power exists in society (Haralombus & Heald 1980 : 99).

Weber's Zero sum conception of power means that power will remain in the hands of powerful unless they give it up or power is taken away from them. We can relate this viewpoint with the doctrine of feminism. Feminism, originating in late eighteenth century suggests that women are systematically disadvantaged in society and advocates equal opportunities for men and women.

There are some other viewpoints on power which are important. According to Page and Czuba (1999), feminists (Miller, 1976. Starhawk 1975), racial and ethnic group (Nicola McLaughlin & Chandler 1984), and even individuals in families bring into focus another aspects of power, which is characterized by collaboration, sharing and mutuality (Kreisberg 1992). This type of power has been termed as relational power (Lappe and DuBois 1994), generative power (Korten 1987), integrative power and power with (Kreisberg 1992). This aspect means that gaining power actually strengthens the power of others rather than diminishing it such as occurs with domination/power. It is this definition of power as a process that occurs in relationships, that gives us possibility of empowerment.

It here becomes essential to understand and analyse some definitions of the term empowerment. Empowerment is an ongoing and dynamic process, which enhances women or any other marginalized and alienated group's abilities to change the structure and ideologies that keep them in a subordinate position (Page and Czuba 1999). Empowerment is therefore clearly concerned with power and particularly with the power relationships and the distribution of power-between individuals and groups (Kahlon P. 2004).

Thus, the concept of empowerment is based on the idea that power relations can change. We should see women empowerment on the basis of above viewpoints implying that systematically disadvantaged position of women in society can change. Empowerment is not possible with 'charity

Manvendra Pratap Singh

Associate Professor
Department of Sociology
D.D.U. Gorakhpur University
Gorakhpur

approach' or in other words it should not increase dependency on others. Women empowerment is the medium to achieve gender equality which implies a society in which men and women enjoy the same opportunities, outcomes, rights and obligations in all spheres of life. It focusses on identifying and redressing power imbalances and giving women more autonomy so that they can actualize their potential. This was also main concern of feminist movement in general although their are different ideologies within feminism. Let us now attempt to provide a classification of feminism into different theoretical families.

Liberal feminists include all those who campaign for equal rights for women within the framework of the liberal state, arguing that the theoretical basis on which state is built is sound but that the rights and privileges it confers must be extended to give them equal citizenship with men (Freedman 2002; 5). Feminism in its early phase was oriented mainly to winning political and legal equality. We can say that early phase of feminism was more inspired by liberal feminism.

From a Marxian perspective, the source of power in society lies in the economic infrastructure. They argue that women are oppressed through system of capitalism and private property. Engels (1884) argues that a women's subordination is not a result of her biological disposition but of social relations, and that men's effort to achieve their demands for control of women's labour and sexual faculties have gradually become institutionalised in the nuclear family (en. wikipedia.org/wiki/Marxist feminism). Thus, Marxist and socialist feminist link gender inequality and women's oppression to the capitalist system of productions and the division of labour consistent with this system (Freedman 2002; 5). This viewpoint is based on the constant sum concept of power since a net gain in the power of dominant group (males) represents a net loss in the power of the rest of society (females).

Radical feminists see men's domination of women as a result of the system of patriarchy, Thus, radical feminism is a perspective that focusses on the hypothesis of patriarchy as a system of power that organizes society into a complex of relationships based on the assertion of male supremacy oppresses women (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radical feminism).

According to Oxford dictionary of Sociology (1994; 251-52) for radical feminists who prioritized patriarchy, men were the main enemy (Delphy) and there was no question of combining with (male) trade unions or political groups to achieve change, as there was for socialist feminists. In addition separatists critiqued 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Andreienne Rich) and argued for feminists to become lesbian. Radical feminists Firestone argued in favour of freeing women from their biology through reproductive technology. Firestone's argument is that sexual difference does not exist in the form of biological difference but that this difference can be transformed through advances in reproductive technology. She argues forcefully against the idea that women have a duty or an innate desire to reproduce. Any female instinct for pregnancy is merely the product of the social construction of femininity and would be

superfluous once human science has mastered reproduction. Firestone's utopia is one where sexual difference is eradicated the difference in child-bearing capacity is wiped out through use of science, and the role of bringing up children, of 'mothering', is taken over equally by men and women in society. This tendency to see reproduction as a site of oppression and to see motherhood as a burden from which women need to be freed is shared by other feminists also. (Freedman 2002, 70-71). There type of views were prevalent in the early years of second wave of feminism. More recent surveys have also added on the categories of psychoanalytic feminism, postmodern or poststructural feminism, black feminism and so on (Freedman 2002; . 5).

First wave of feminism is used to refer feminist movement of late nineteenth century and early twentieth century which was focussed mainly on right of suffrage for women. However, issues of women's rights were raised earlier than this period also in different parts of Europe. Let us now focus on early phase of feminism which started mainly in France, United States and Britain. In the 1790's after the French Revolution many women's clubs were formed in Paris. They were inspired by the ideals of freedom and equality which were central themes of French revolution. These clubs developed political programmes also demanding for equal rights in the field of education, employment and government. Marie Gouze was leader of one of these clubs. She drafted a statement entitled 'Declaration of the Rights of Women' which was based on the ideals of French Revolution.

In the United States feminists were working with groups devoted to abolition of slavery. However, they were not allowed to come in the mainstream of anti-slavery movement which was mainly lead by males. Later on women organisation got disenchanted with it and changed their focus on issues directly related to gender inequalities.

One of the most significant development occurred in Britain where a large number of women signed and presented a petition to the British Parliament in 1860. It demanded full voting rights for women. The petition did not receive any attention and in response its leaders formed the 'National Society for Women's Suffrage'. The members of this society were called suffragists who strongly advocated for women's rights to vote. After a long struggle women's rights to vote on an equal basis with men was achieved in many countries including USA (1920) and Britain (1928). After 1920, feminist movement in Europe and United States fell into decline. It was during 1960's that women's movement again gained momentum. Third world countries were also effected in the second wave of feminist movement. However, center of active feminism was North America and Europe in the wake of civil rights, student and anti imperialist movements. The issue of economic equality, control over reproduction and alteration in laws concerning divorce etc. became important. As mentioned earlier views of radical feminists like Firestone etc. gained attention during this phase of feminism. Some feminist have, however, articulated a very positive side to motherhood, and have argued that it can and should be a pleasurable and empowering experience for

women. Andrienne Rich (1976), for example, argues that it is medicine and technology, and specifically male control of that technology, that has made reproduction an area of oppression. This medicine and technology has been used by men because they are scared of women's powers of reproduction and motherhood, and want to control them (Freedman 2002; 71).

The feminist movement has achieved a lot over the past five decades. Yet, in the 1980's it faced a counter reaction. Feminism, they claim has undermined the importance of marriage and family. Lone parent families are on rise and somehow condition of women has become worst. Because of these changes women are suffering from many physical and mental disorders. Faludi argues that due to feminist upsurge there has been a male backlash. She says that a situation of 'post-feminism' has arrived. As quoted by Freedman, Lynne Segal (1999: 32) concludes in answer to the question 'why feminism ? : Because its most radical goal, both personal and collective, has yet to be realized : a world which is a better place not just for some women, but to all women: And, as she goes on to add, that world would be better not just for women, but for men as well.

As mentioned earlier the goal of feminism was centered on the concept of women empowerment. If we try to compare feminism and idea of women empowerment prevalent in West with that in India we can find a significant difference. During late 18th and early 19th century in Europe and United States women fought for rights of women and they were opposed by men as well as state but in India initial struggle for women's rights was mainly led by males. During the social reform movement Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj contributed a lot in raising issues concerning women in India. Both Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj were led by males: Raja Ram Mohan Ray and Dayanand Saraswati. Thus, we can say the status of women was an issue of great concern to nineteenth century reformers in India. Their first efforts were directed against certain customs-sati, female infanticide and prohibition against widow remarriage-seen as detrimental to the status of women. Later they tried to educate women and bring them into public life (Forbes 1979: 365). During 1910 to 1930 various women organizations grew rapidly. Gandhi tried to bring women directly into freedom struggle. After independence from British rule the Indian constitution declared equality a fundamental right. This document also guaranteed equal protection of the law, equal opportunities in public employment, and prohibited discrimination in public places. The Hindu Code, passed as separate Acts between 1950 and 1955, rewrote for Hindus and laws of marriage and divorce, adoption, and inheritance. Adult suffrage added women to electoral roles and political parties pledged their commitment to women's issues. The state developed a bureaucratic structure designed to meet the specific needs of women. In the documents of the new Indian state the past had been undone, modernity was triumphant and women were no longer subordinate to men (Forbes 1998: 223-24)

In 1976 Government of India had adopted a 'National Plan of Action for Women'. Apart from this Sixth Five year plan (1980-85) document devoted a chapter on 'women' and recognized the role of women in national development as partners/contributors rather than recipients/beneficiaries. A national perspective plan for Women (1988-2000) was drawn up in 1988. The National Commission for Women was set-up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 (Lingam 2002: 316). While state has been working for empowerment of Women in India in many decades after Independence its role has also been seen with a different angle after the advent of structural changes in economic policies. After 1990 economic policies in India witnessed significant changes which worked towards impoverishing the majority of women according to some scholars. However, the expansion of market economy in India has brought a large number of women into the workforce who had traditionally been dependent on husbands and male members of their family.

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