Rajagiri Journal of Social Development
Volume 5, Number 2, December 2013

Women Empowerment: The Psychological Dimension

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Abstract

Women empowerment has been a major thrust of the development initiatives of the time. A great deal of time and effort has been spent on economic empowerment ignoring women as persons and the necessity for their psychological empowerment. Psychological empowerment is considered in recent studies sometimes as personal empowerment built on control over oneself and the situations one lives in. Women empowerment programmes, especially self-help groups, have been designed in developing countries as a means for women empowerment. This article attempts to conceptualize the idea of psychological empowerment of women, through women empowerment programmes. Though psychological empowerment of women depends on power within, power with, power over and power to resources in living situations, it is more of a personal one in nature. The authors attempt to sketch psychological empowerment as a construct that integrates self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-determination that is expressed in psychological well-being and happiness, which is pivotal to psychological empowerment of women. It is manifested in a proactive approach to life and a critical understanding of the socio-political environment of women.

Keywords

psychological empowerment, women, self-esteem, self-efficacy, self help groups

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Introduction

Over the last decade, the concept of empowerment has emerged as the main paradigm of development (Zens, 2008). The concept of empowerment has been defined in various disciplines according to the area of focus. Empowerment is the process of enabling or authorizing an individual to think, behaves, take action and control work in an autonomous way and to take control of one's own destiny. It includes both control over resources and ideology. Control over resources includes physical, human, intellectual and financial and control over ideology including belief, values and attitudes (Batliwala, 1994). It is a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives, communities and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important. Empowerment is now increasingly seen as a process by which, the ones' without power gain greater control over their lives. This means control over material assets, intellectual resources and ideology. Authors have attempted to contribute to this process by conceptualizing empowerment as a transformative process (Kabeer, 2001; Rowlands, 1997; Oxaal and Baden, 1997). The article begins with the review of the definitions of empowerment, and then proceeds to the psychological aspects of empowerment.

Empowerment

The term 'empowerment' is a contested concept which indicates different meanings depending on different perspectives. It is a term that linked with concepts like gender and the rights of the weaker and marginalized sections of the society like women, children and the backward classes. There is a variety of understanding of the term empowerment due to its widespread usage. It is a construct shared by many disciplines such as rural development, psychology, education, economics and sociology.

Rappaport (1984) noted that it is easy to define empowerment by its absence but difficult to define in action as it takes on different forms in different people and contexts. Zimmerman (1984) stated that asserting a single definition of empowerment may make attempts to achieve it formulaic or prescription-like, contradicting the very concept of empowerment. The term empowerment is defined as the notion of people having the ability to understand and control themselves and their environments—including social, economic, and political factors—expanding their capabilities and horizons and elevating themselves to greater levels of achievement and satisfaction (Wilson, 1996). Empowered individuals are

described as having high self-esteem, feelings of self-efficacy, feelings of control over his/her life, increased critical awareness, and increased civic participation (Zimmerman, 1995; 2000).

Chamberlain (1997), who viewed empowerment more in the perspective of mental health rehabilitation, referred to empowerment as a process that has a number of qualities such as decision making power, access to information and resources, access to a range of options from which to make choices. Page and Czuba (1999)asserted that empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power in people for use in their own lives, communities and society, by acting on issues they define as important**.**

The concept of power is the heart of empowerment theory. Lukes (1974) noted that power can be understood as operating mainly in four levels. Firstly, *power over*, which is exerted over someone or, less negatively, allows someone to be guided and triggers either passive or active resistance. Secondly, *power to*, refers to a power which relates to the ability to make decisions, authority and power to solve problems, and can be creative and enabling. Third aspect of power is *power with* which refers to the social or political power that involves the notion of common purpose or understanding, as well as the ability to get together to negotiate and defend collective goals (individual and collective rights, political ideas such as lobbying, etc. The last level is *power within*, and the notion of power refers to self-awareness, self-esteem, identity and assertiveness. It refers to how individuals, through analysing their experiences, understands how power operates in their lives, and gain the confidence to act to influence and change this (Charlier and Caubergs, 2007; Lukes, 1974; Oxaal and Baden, 1997). So the notion of empowerment thus forms part of the vision to acquire power, to control one's life and make choices and the people's ability to have access to things(Kabeer, 2001). Alsop and others (2006) classified empowerment into two types. First, expansion of agency, the ability to act on behalf of what you value and have reasons to value (Malhotra and Schuler, 2005). The second element is more widely defined so as to include institutional environment which offers people the opportunity to exercise agency effectively.

A review of definitions of empowerment reveals both diversity and commonality. Most of these focuses on issues of gaining power and control over decisions and resources that determine the quality of one's life, while some others also consider structural inequalities that affect entire social groups rather than focus only on individual characteristics.

Psychological Empowerment

Conger and Kanungo (1988) were among the first to define empowerment from a psychological perspective. In contrast to the social-structural perspective which equated empowerment with the delegation of authority and resources sharing, Conger and Kanungo (1988) viewed empowerment as enabling or enhancing personal efficacy. Thomas and Velthouse (1990) built on this initial psychological conceptualization, by defining empowerment as intrinsic task motivation consisting of four dimensions: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Meaning involves a fit between the needs of one's work role and one's beliefs, values and behaviours. Competence refers to self-efficacy specific to one's work, a belief in one's capability to perform work activities with skill. Self-determination is a sense of choice in initiating and regulating one's actions. Self-determination reflects autonomy over the initiation and continuation of work behaviour and processes. Finally, the impact is the degree to which one can influence strategic, administrative, or operating outcomes at work. Besides these, in the psychological perspective, a sense of perceived control over one's environment and others is considered one of the primary psychological states fundamental to the experience of empowerment (Thomas and Velthouse, 1990).

Psychological empowerment seems to reflect what Rowlands (1997) called personal empowerment. Rowlands (1997) defined personal empowerment as something internal that one can develop and strengthen and is not dependent on others. Rowlands (1997)identified self-confidence, self-esteem, sense of agency, sense of 'self' in a wider context and 'dignity' as the core set of elements that formed the basis of transformation processes that led to empowerment. An essential element of the personal 'core' is the ability of an individual to move out of one's culture or context specific gender roles. Rowlands (1997) opined that there was a need to distinguish between the core of the empowerment process and the circumstances that appear to encourage or inhibit the process. The core of empowerment process is the transformation of the individual or the group that is the 'key' that will undo the 'locks' to the door of empowerment. These are the circumstances that appear to encourage or inhibit the process. She also argues that empowerment can be experienced and exercised in three different dimensions: primarily at the personal level; secondly in close relationships; and finally within a group. Rowlands argued that transformation of individual and circumstances were core aspects of

empowerment and depending on these dimensions, people who were empowered had self-control over decisions and decision-making power (Rowlands, 1997).

Zimmerman's (2000) model of psychological empowerment included three constructs viz., intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioural. Zimmerman (2000) described intrapersonal empowerment as people's own beliefs about their ability to control their environment and achieve their goals. It is perceived as the emotional component of psychological empowerment, and focuses on a person's feelings about his/her inner world. Intrapersonal empowerment construct is also indicated by one's perceived control, self-efficacy, competence, and motivation. Interactional empowerment could involve new insights, information, and knowledge, and could include being able to identify useful resources, knowing how to access these resources, and understanding barriers to resource access. Behavioural empowerment reflects efforts made that promote an individual's strengths or competencies. Zimmerman (1995) emphasized that actions associated with behavioural empowerment would vary with the goals and opportunities available.

Masi et al. (2003) referred psychological empowerment as an individual's ability to make decisions and have control over his or her personal life and characterized by a sense of perceived control, competence and goal internalization. It combines personal efficacy and competence, a sense of mastery and control, and a process of participation to influence decisions and institutions.

The psychological component involves a person believing that one can act at personal and social levels to improve one's own conditions (Mosedale, 2005). Oladipo (2009) considered psychological empowerment as a multi-faceted construct reflecting the different dimensions of being psychologically enabled, and was conceived as a positive integrate of perceptions of personal control, a proactive approach to life, and a critical understanding of the socio-political environment, which was rooted firmly in a social action framework that includes community change, capacity building, and collectivity.

Self-esteem is very important and an influential aspect of the self-concept, and essentially an evaluative dimension of the self-concept. Most people think well of themselves and desire to increase their esteem and desire to avoid loss of esteem. High self-esteem denotes thinking well of oneself which includes healthy self-confidence and proper appreciation of one's

genuine accomplishment and abilities. Low self-esteem means that the individual is having a negative and unflattering view of the self. People with high self-esteem have clear, consistent and definite idea about themselves. Low self-esteem can be marked by self-concept confusion (Chamberlin, 1997). The construct of self-efficacy is distinct from self-esteem in its conceptualization. Theorists conceptualize self-esteem as a person's beliefs about self-worth and self-acceptance; self-efficacy is conceptualized as a person's beliefs about their ability to perform successfully (Harter, 1999).

Psychological empowerment is highly related with happiness of the individual. Happiness is a scientifically unwieldy term and that its study involves dissolving the term into at least three distinct and better-defined routes to "happiness": the pleasant life, the engaged life and the meaningful life (Seligman, 2002). Engaging one in the organization for empowerment can lead to happiness once they are able to engage themselves, find pleasure in the activities engaged and thereby experience meaning in life.

Diener and Biswas-Diener (2005) view psychological empowerment as a facet of psychological well-being. Certain aspects of psychological well-being, such as positive emotions, are often accompanied by or lead to psychological empowerment. Psychological empowerment consists both in the ability to control the environment and the feeling one can do so. Well-being is a dynamic concept that includes subjective, social, and psychological dimensions as well as health-related behaviours. Well-being is also a multifaceted concept. Seifert (2005) based on Ryffs Scale of Psychological Well-Being (1995), noted that well-being is a dynamic concept that includes subjective, social, and psychological dimensions as well as health-related behaviours. The Ryff Scales focuses on multiple facets of psychological well-being. These facets include self-acceptance, the establishment of quality ties to other, a sense of autonomy in thought and action, the ability to manage complex environments to suit personal needs and values, the pursuit of meaningful goals and a sense of purpose in life and continued growth and development as a person. Ryff has focused on six areas of psychological well-being: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Seifert, 2005). Every culture has its own more specific definition of psychosocial well-being and how it should be represented, maintained and acquired (Becker and Weyermann, 2006).

Rowlands (1997) and Desmukh-Ranadive and Murthy (2005) emphasized the importance of mental process for empowerment. Weide and Waslander (2007) noted that mental processes are hard to measure. They focused on aspects of psychological well-being which are more suitable for quantitative measurement and distinguish five central elements of psychological well-being viz., self-esteem, self-efficacy, happiness, power and isolation, as crucial for individual psychological empowerment. Huppert (2009) on the basis of review of different studies concluded that psychological well-being is associated with ?exible and creative thinking, pro-social behaviour, and good physical health. An individual's level of mental capital and psychological well-being is powerfully in?uenced by her/his early environment. Though external circumstances affect well-being, but actions and attitudes may have a greater influence. Interventions which encourage positive actions and attitudes have an important role to play in enhancing the well-being. For the individuals, empowerment is concerned with the transformation of individuals' lives in achieving goals and reaching targets, which they had thought impossible (i. e. to gain authority, skills, status, self-belief and image, progressing to greater things and increasing rewards).

This highlights the importance of psychological empowerment in the empowerment process. A person cannot be empowered unless the belief that one can change the situation of one's own and will be willing to engage in activities that are geared towards changing ones situation. It is clear that lack of psychological empowerment will render all other forms of empowerment ineffective. Psychologically empowered women will have the necessary motivation to pursue things on their own and this may be critical in their integral development.

Women's Empowerment

According to Sarah Mosedale (2005), there are four basic assumptions which seem to be generally accepted in the literature on women's empowerment. In order to be empowered, an individual must have been disempowered. In this respect, women empowerment is important because women have been disempowered especially when compared to men. Secondly, empowerment cannot be provided by a third party, but they may be able to create conditions favourable to empowerment. Thirdly, the definitions of empowerment usually include a sense of people making decision on matters which are important in their lives. Fourthly, empowerment is an ongoing process (Mosedale, 2005).

Women empowerment can be defined as all those processes where women take control and ownership of their lives. Control and ownership require an array of opportunities to choose among and this understanding of empowerment overlaps with the concept of human development. The architects of the Indian constitution were conscious of the problem of women empowerment and hence they ensured the Principle of Gender Equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental duties and Directive Principles. Article 15 declares that government shall not discriminate any citizen on the ground of sex and article 15 (3) makes a special provision, enabling the State to make affirmative discriminations in favour of women. Through Article 15 (A) (e), the Constitution imposes a fundamental duty on every citizen to renounce the practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

UNICEF's (1993) woman empowerment framework argued that women's development can be viewed in terms of equality at five levels: welfare, access, conscientization, participation and control, of which empowerment an essential element. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) includes acquiring understanding of gender relations and the ways in which these relations can be changed, developing a sense of self-worth, a belief in one's ability to secure desired changes and the right to control one's own life, gaining the ability to generate choices and exercise bargaining power, developing the ability to organize and influence the direction of social change to create a more just, social and economic order, nationally and internationally as dimensions of empowerment (Derbyshire, 2002).

The issue of women empowerment has been mainly approached from the economic and political angles and seems to neglect an influential factor necessary for successful empowerment, namely, psychological empowerment. According to Nelly Stromquist (1988), women's empowerment is a socio-political concept that involves cognitive, psychological, economic and political dimensions. The cognitive components involve women's understanding of the causes of their subordination and magnetizations and appreciating the need to make choices that may go against cultural or social expectations. The psychological component includes women believing that they can act at personal and social levels to improve their condition. It involves an escape from 'learned

helplessness' and the development of self-esteem and con?dence. For the economic component, she argued, although work outside the home often implies a double burden, access to such work increases economic independence and therefore independence in general. The political component includes the ability to imagine one's situation and mobilize for social change. The justification for empowerment often arises when an individual or group of individuals are incapable of or prevented from actualizing their potentials due to barriers created by individuals or other people within the environment. The individual's assessment of the situation and impetus to change the situation, therefore, is fundamental in empowerment process.

Oladipo (2009) argued that when people are psychologically empowered there will be a change in attitude, cognition and behaviour, which most assuredly will lead to a positive change in value orientation, increased patriotic actions, ability to postpone gratification of one's desires, improved self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-consciousness as well as better psychological well-being which will culminate in a peaceful and developing society.

Self Help Groups and Psychological Empowerment of Women

Empowerment is essentially a bottom-up process rather than something that can be formulated as a top-down strategy. Understanding empowerment in this way means that development agencies cannot claim to empower women. Women must empower themselves. Devising coherent policies and programmes for women's empowerment requires careful attention, because external agencies/bodies tend to be positioned with 'power-over' target populations. Appropriate external support and intervention, however, can be important to foster and support the process of empowerment. Development organisations can, under some circumstances, play an enabling or facilitating role. They can ensure that their programmes work to support women's individual empowerment by encouraging women's participation, acquisition of skills, decision-making capacity, and control over resources. Agencies working towards an empowerment approach must therefore develop ways of enabling women themselves to critically assess their own situation and create and shape a transformation in society.

Most of the programmes of women empowerment have an effect on

women. Kabeer (2001) noted that 'access to credit has allowed women and men to meet the survival goals and put their livelihoods on a more secure basis, without compromising their dignity and sense of self-worth' (Kabeer, 1998: 64). Participation in microcredit programmes often leads to an increase of feelings such as self-esteem, self-worth and agency, and thus, further processes of psychological empowerment (Weide and Waslander, 2007). Other positive changes reported was the learning of new skills, an increase in happiness, becoming more self-reliant, more assertive, ability to articulate opinions and a wider view of the world beyond their family or villages. In addition, Desmukh-Ranadive and Murthy (2005) suggested that stimulating empowerment was possible through a group approach and strategy of the portfolio of products and services of the organization.

Lucita Lazo (1995) argued that empowerment enabled a woman to: 1) gain insight; 2) have awareness of what is undesirable and unfavourable about her current situation; 3) perceive a better situation -and the possibilities of attaining it; and 4) realize what is within her reach and what she could do to improve her situation. The empowerment process could involve a change of perceptions about the self, the environment and the relationships between both -the self and the environment. Empowerment is a moving state, i. e.,a continuum that varies in degrees of power. Empowerment means building aspirations, hopes and expectations (Lazo, 1995).

The personal autonomy, political, and social empowerment though recognized by the authors among the women empowerment programmes and projects, the psychological empowerment still needs to be addressed (Paul and Francina, 2013). The self-efficacy that influences not only the courses of action pursued, but also the effort expended, perseverance in the face of difficulties, the nature of thought patterns (i. e. encouraging or self-deprecating) and the amount of stress experienced in demanding situations, especially the confidence in one's abilities to do the things that he/she tries to do (Bandura, 1977). Self help groups (SHGs) and their activities are expected to be empowered to face their life and its requirements with high self-efficacy, holding high self-esteem that provides them high level of happiness in all its sense; pleasure, engagement and meaning. This calls for targeted interventions to build psychological

empowerment. In order to provide capacity building, self-efficacy enhancement programmes have to be promoted. This can be triggered by generating awareness to identify positive emotions, and engage in related activities so that meaning of life is identified by the SHG members that will lead to happiness in life.

Conclusion

Empowerment has been designed as a transformative process that capacitate the individual to obtain the endowments and entitlements offered as citizens of a country. This is realized through the control of an individual over the personal and societal life an individual achieved in the living situations. Psychological empowerment, one of the crucial dimensions of empowerment consists of various dimensions, especially self-esteem, self-confidence, psychological well-being and happiness, plays a pivotal role in the woman empowerment process. Though micro-credit and thrift centred activities were able to generate women empowerment (Kabeer, 2001) psychological empowerment has not been a point of discussion in understanding empowerment as a total concept.

Psychological empowerment is possible when targeted interventions facilitated by activities initiated by the leadership in a personalised manner. For psychological empowerment as a construct integrates perceptions of personal control, a proactive approach to life and a critical understanding of the socio-political environment.

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