

## Do Empowerment Programmes Actually Empower Women?

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### ABSTRACT

*Women are powerless, disadvantaged and their access to resources and ownership of properties are minimal in most of the developing countries. In order to empower women in those developing societies, many empowerment programmes like microfinance, political mobilization, and providing education opportunities are in place. Even the notion of women's empowerment is also included in the Millennium Development Goals. The paper tries to examine the different empowerment programmes along with their successes and limitations towards empowering women. It is evident from the study that the result of empowerment programmes is mixed. The empowerment programmes significantly contribute to women's empowerment but do not empower all women in all situations and equally. Empowerment is also related to the determination of the women themselves.*

**Keywords:** Women empowerment, Microfinance, Political mobilisation, Education

### INTRODUCTION

If we look at the total population of the world, we see women constitute almost half of the world's population. However, considering the number of poor people in the world, women are major than men with a number of 70 percent of the total poor (Verma, 2009). Women are powerless, disadvantaged and socially and educationally backward and their access to resources and ownership of properties are minimal in most of the developing countries. Over the decades, there had been attempts from different spheres to ensure the power of women particularly in developing world. Even the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) also want to achieve the empowerment of women across the globe. In order to enhance the empowerment of women, different programmes are undertaken by the national governments along with local NGOs and INGOs supported by international donors.

According to the indicators of MDG goal 3, the numbers of women representatives in national parliament should be increased. The need for women's representation in the local governments has also been underscored by the UN Millennium Project Task Force report on Education and Gender equality (UNMP/TFEGE, 2005). Apart from this political mobilization, many other programmes like microcredit schemes for women, education opportunity for girls, introducing ICT programmes and income generating programmes are in place in order to promote empowerment of women in many developing countries. But there are growing debates, whether these programmes are really empowering women or not? The increase of women's representation in political system is of course a strategic change in the empowerment of women but does not necessarily directly correlate with the empowerment of mass poor women (Subrahmanian, 2004). Microcredit has been widely used as a panacea in empowering women and it has also mixed results. Microcredit has enabled poor women to come out from the houses to public spheres as the first step of women's empowerment but it has also suppressed their empowerment in creating problems like increased domestic violence, losing control over credits in some situations. In relation to success of microcredit

to empower women, Swain and Wallentin (2009) argue that women's empowerment happens only when women can challenge existing social norms and culture for their well being by participating the Self Help Groups of Microfinance and not all the members get empowered as same pace. Education is, of course, a vital element in the empowerment of women, but if there are fewer opportunities to utilise those knowledge in their empowerment then it is merely an added qualification to them (Kabeer, 2005).

In this paper, there will be an attempt to critically look at the different empowerment programmes aimed to enhance women's empowerment and determine their successes and limitations.

### **EMPOWERMENT: WHAT IT IS?**

Empowerment has become one of the most widely discussed 'development terms' over the decades. Government, NGOs, women groups, international aid agencies are working from their respective fields in order to promote the empowerment of women. Yet it is widely used, the notion of 'empowerment' is not so simple and there is no unanimous way to measure and observe it. Kabeer (2001) asserts that the empowerment could be complex in the same context because it has multiple dimensions and routes.

On the other hand, empowerment is a bottom-up process and different from past top-down approaches of development. Murphy-Graham (2010) sees the word 'power' as core to the notion of empowerment. The notion of power depends on possession of assets and increased capabilities. Empowerment again challenges the current power structures that determine the position of men and women in a given society. Empowerment is a transformative process that challenges not only patriarchy but also the structures of class, race, religion and ethnicity, which determine the condition of women and men (Batliwala, 1994; Kabeer, 1994). Charmes and Weiringa (2003:421) assert that the empowerment of both men and women depends on three dimensions 'exposing the oppressing power of the existing gender relations, critically challenging them and creatively trying to shape different social relations'. Kaler (2001) argues that sometimes the notion of empowerment can be a zero sum game with the concept of 'loss of power on the gain of power'. In a study, Kaler (2001) shows the empowerment of women as of using female condoms is viewed as threat to the masculinity by their male counterparts. However, Swift and Levin (1987:75) argue 'there is nothing in the definition of empowerment that requires that increasing of power of one person or group means decreasing the power of another person or group'.

Given the situation, a gendered view of empowerment can be 'a process of enablement of women so that they become capable of taking control of their circumstances; the resources available in their environment; and of exerting influence over the decision making process at various levels (Verma, 2009:232). We can term 'empowerment' as a process which challenges the existing power relations within society and enables a particular group to negotiate, bargain and demand their new position where the concept of 'loss of power on the gain of power' can occur.

### **EMPOWERMENT PROGRAMMES TO EMPOWER WOMEN**

Since the notion of development has been created, the need for changes in the lives of poor has been recognised by the respective governments, development agencies and donors. It is very evident that the women are the major portion of poor people in the developing countries. So, there had been different types of development programmes to reduce the poverty of poor

women. Particularly during the 80s, at the time of the emergence of many NGOs, the concept of women development and empowerment has got a new dimension in the global development initiatives. Apart from government initiatives, NGOs and Women groups initiated numerous programmes for the sake of changes in the lives of poor women. Bano (2009) asserts that women empowerment programmes are central to the working of most international development agencies.

In recent days, there has been many development programmes to empower women. These programmes have been even recognized by the global agencies like United Nations, World Bank and other international donors. Microcredit for women, education opportunity for women, enhanced political mobilization and participation by women, using ICT as a tool for women development are some of the programmes that are being used worldwide, particularly in the developing countries, to empower the women.

### **POLITICAL MOBILIZATION FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT**

Political mobilization has been widely used to enhance the empowerment of women by increasing the number of women representations in the national parliament. Increased women's participation in national parliaments has also been recognized as one of the goals of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by the UN summit in 2000. Political participation is a process where the women are encouraged to participate in political issues and it is part of women's political empowerment.

The increase of women's share of seats in national parliament and local governmental bodies can help to broaden the ways of women's empowerment. However, Kabeer (2005:22) argues that 'the women who enter national parliaments are not generally drawn from the ranks of poor people, nor there is any guarantee that they will be more responsive to the needs and priorities of poor women than many men in parliament'. Rather Kabeer (2005) sees the women representations in local governments are more relevant to poor women in their empowerment than the parliaments. Kabeer (2005) further argues that the electoral system is also important in order to ensure the women empowerment through political mobilization. At the same time, the interest and ideology of the political parties are very crucial in nominating more women candidates in the elections.

We can put the example of South Africa in order to determine the success of enhanced political mobilization in women's empowerment. After the apartheid period, there have been significant increases in the numbers of women MPs in national parliament along with increased women's representation in local government level in South Africa. In 2009, South Africa was holding 3<sup>rd</sup> position in terms of women's representation in national parliament behind Rwanda and Sweden (SA Good news, 2009). Does it necessarily change the overall status of women empowerment on the ground? South African is also notorious in terms of violence against women. South Africa has the highest reported rape cases in the world despite having a higher women's representation in national parliament (Dempster, 2002). Progress of the world women report 2002 prepared by UNIFEM denotes that some more 13 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have higher rates of women participation in the parliament than developed countries like Japan, France and US (Datta and Sen, 2009). The higher representation in the parliament does not necessarily ensure the empowerment of grassroots women in those countries.

Bangladesh is a country where the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition are women for a long time. But the country is yet show significant achievement in terms of women empowerment including parliamentary representation. Again, their presence in the key positions of Bangladesh did not necessarily foster women's political empowerment

significantly after the emergence of democratic government since 1991. Bangladesh's position in the 2001 Human Development Index was 132th in terms of Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) despite having women leaders in two key positions (Halder, 2004)

In many countries, the introduction of Quota system helped to raise the number of women's representation in parliament since the beginning of 1990s. Fleschenberg (2007) argues that most of the women selected as member of parliament in South and Southeast Asia are from the dominant class and they seldom lead a general women empowerment and gender sensitive policy making at national level terming the quota as a mean of 'tokenism' rather than empowerment.

However, the increased political participation regardless of all means will create a situation where the women can raise their voice gradually and contribute to create an environment with equal rights for all and minimizing gender gap even in the policy making level. Women's equal participation in political life plays a significant role in the advancement of women empowerment because their decision making is at least a crucial matter in the national parliament and local government level (Khan and Ara, 2006).

### **MICROFINANCE: A PANACEA FOR WOMEN?**

Microfinance is the most widely used measure in order to promote the empowerment of women by the microfinance institutions in many developing countries. However, Kabeer (2001) argues that the microcredit's role in the empowerment of women is a conflicting conclusion which is real and apparent. As Rahman *et al* (2009:228) argue that 'impact of microfinance on women's empowerment suffers from negligence of problem arising from heterogeneity bias'. For this reason, they measured the notion of empowerment in both borrowers and non-borrowers women of microfinance in their case study.

Women's empowerment is one of the reasons behind the concept of Microfinance and it is not the single objectives. Kabeer (2001) rightly argues that there are many reasons behind the concept of lending money to women apart from empowerment. For this reason, the pattern of Microcredit providing institutions has been seen not so effective in many situations. Rutherford (2000) (cited in Kabeer, 2001) suggests that many NGOs aiming to promote microcredit in South Asia failed to establish an effective financial services because they focus on many social issues rather than financial services on the ground.

Menon (2007:64-65) argues that microfinance cannot be a magical medicine in the empowerment of women because in the absence of 'effective social capital, capacity building, training'; merely flow of microcredit money to women can lead to an unforeseen effects rather than poverty alleviation and empowerment. Goetz and Gupta (1996) argue that most of women's loans are directly controlled by their male partner while the women are responsible for the repayment. So, in real situation the notion of women's empowerment by this loan is not happening because the women are not in position to control their loan. The reason behind this is that men in the developing countries are considered as the bread earners of the family and often, in most cases, it is culturally accepted to allow the male ownership of properties (Kabeer, 2001)

However the microcredit can bring some positive changes in the lives of poor women who do not have access to formal economy. Mahmud (2003) puts the example of Bangladesh where the microcredit loans by the specialised banks like Grameen and other NGOs reaching to the remote poor women with important consequences for women's empowerment. These loans creating a platform where the women are contributing to improve their well-being, literacy

and schooling of their children, health and nutrition status, labour force participation, contraceptive use, mobility and ownership of clothing and assets (*ibid.*).

Kabeer (2005) argues that the microfinance facility apparently creates an opportunity for the women to make a contribution to the economic productivity and well being of themselves and other members in the family but it does not automatically empower the women. The notion of empowerment to the women in providing microfinance sometimes may be uncertain. Al-Amin and Chowdhury (2008) argue that giving credit to women sometimes increases women's income, also brings benefit like health, livelihoods, violence reduction, self esteem and self-confidence.

Swain and Wallentin (2009) show two effects of microfinance in the empowerment of women in direct and indirect ways. The direct benefit for women empowerment is that when women become a member of group and exposed for training and awareness creating. The indirect effect is when the women's bargaining power increased in the household decision makings as part of relative increased value of women's time and income because of their involvement in microfinance.

## **EDUCATION AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT**

Women are less educated than men in the context of developing countries. This is one of the main reasons behind the less presence of women in the formal employment sectors of developing countries. There is a strong relationship between education and women's empowerment, if the women are engaged in paid employment, once completing their education. This also helps them to come out from informal and agricultural works where their contribution is often undermined. Sen (2007) argues that educated women send their daughters to school than uneducated women describing education as a fundamental tool for women's empowerment. Swain and Wallentin (2009) see education as vital element when women go beyond their individual level to engage in greater participation and decision making in the society. Tawo *et al* (2009) correlate with education and women's empowerment as the education enables women to use their acquired knowledge and skill to the changes in their surroundings and participate in social, political and economic activities. Murphy-Graham (2010) argues that intimate relationship can play a vital role in the process of women's empowerment by education. Providing education to the women can influence the intimate relationship which can change the power relations and ultimately the notion of women's empowerment happens.

Former Chief Economist of World Bank Lawrence Summers emphasised the need for education in the development of women. He said 'an educated mother faces a higher opportunity cost of time spent caring for the children. She has greater value outside the house and thus has an entirely different set of choices than she would have without education. She is married at a later age and is better able to influence family decisions. She has fewer, healthier children and can insist on the development of all of them, ensuring that her daughters are given a fair chance ... The vicious cycle is thus transformed into a virtuous circle' (Cited in Jeffery and Basu, 1996:17). Both formal and informal education can promote the empowerment of women. Participants in International Seminar on Women education and empowerment agreed that 'in order to promote women's empowerment it is necessary to create an environment that will allow women to participate in educational programmes and share the benefit' (Medel-Anonuevo and Bochynek, 1995: 6-7).

It is widely believed that women's empowerment can be enhanced by ensuring proper education for them. Even in the Millennium Development Goals, the need for education for women has been stressed. In achieving the MDGs, the need for closing gender gaps in all

levels of education has been emphasised. It is true that education can play a vital role in the empowerment of women. Kabeer (2005:16) argues that education can bring changes in cognitive ability that is crucial to 'women's capacity to question, to reflect on, and to act on the conditions of their lives and to gain access to knowledge, information and new ideas that will help them to do so'. Kabeer (2005) further argues that education increase women's capacity to deal with the outside world, well being of them and their family, brings positive changes in the power relationships within and outside households and reduces domestic violence.

However, the success of education in enhancing the women's empowerment depends on the context in which it is provided and complex social relationships (Kabeer, 2005). Kabeer (2005) further argues that in some situation education only helps women to become a better wife or mother or even to get a good husband. Again, the social relationship matters in getting education where different communities are treated based on social inequalities and the notion of empowerment by education proves to be not fully successful.

Sometimes, the notion of empowerment by education could be misleading and confusing. Kabeer (2005) argues that the curriculum of education is sometimes gender stereotyping which make the girls as passive, modest and shy. Policy makers also want to see the women in the spheres of family to improve the condition of family rather than to prepare them for the equal opportunity in economy and society. In most of the developing countries, the education is not free fully in all levels. Girls in the poor family are often in a position that cannot meet the expenses of higher education.

## **INTRODUCING ICT PROGRAMMES FOR WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT**

The modern age is believed to be the age of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). The poor women in the developing countries can be empowered and come out from the vicious cycle of poverty if they are given modern ICT facilities. At the same time, the women can be given training on ICT. Green (2008) argues that if the women are given the knowledge of ICT there is a possibility to enhance their political empowerment. A woman with ICT knowledge is confident and possesses general knowledge of women's rights and gender issues while at the micro level ICT programmes involve women individually and collectively to be connected with each other and other political institutions to redress their problems and better solution (*ibid*). The role of internet is also important in organizing the women and their groups for mutual benefit at local and international level in the ways of a holistic women's empowerment.

Balka (1993) states that internet empowers women in a way where the dispersed users are connected geographically helping them to find community and organize politically in pursuit of their own interests. Bangladesh's Grameen Bank implemented a project where poor village women received a cell phone with international connectivity. Women do business with the phone in the village. Thus the bank's project helping to 'eradicate poverty not only by providing the poor with better access to information' but also 'low-income women borrowers can use these phones a means of household income generation' (James, 2000:774)

However, there are some limitations in empowering women with the help of ICT. All new ICT equipments are not cheap enough for the rural poor women so that they can use. They are not in a position to avail those costly items and use in their daily life improve their status in the society.

## EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN: HOW IT CAN BE ACHIEVED?

The notion of women's empowerment is dependent on various issues in the context a developing country. Apart from government initiatives, there are many NGOs are working in order to promote the empowerment of women. For this, they try to include the women in their programmes. Cornwall (2003) puts an example of Oxfam where they were concerned about the extra work loads of women, creating distance from community participation and possible clash with the men in their families so that they can engage in more participatory ways to the development programmes of Oxfam. Verma (2009:247) argues for the need of empowerment process 'simultaneously at individual, group (family) and community levels'.

Kabeer (2001) further shows that in some context, the empowerment of women is purely dependent on the religious and cultural norms. In Bangladesh, if the women do not participate in the market transactions because of purdah and other social cultures they will remain dependent on their male household members to undertake their such activities and their real economic advancement along with empowerment will be restricted (Kabeer, 2001). Rahman et al (2009) assert that the age of women could be vital in the determination of women's empowerment. They found in their research that the young women are more empowered than older women. They also found that assets of women play a significant role for the empowerment of women.

It would not be possible to attain women's empowerment just excluding male members from the programmes. Verma (2009) rightly tells that the notion of empowerment must be understood as the power of sharing, giving, caring and developing the potential of every men and women rather than to dominate each other. .

Sometimes, the concept of empowerment may not be same in different contexts. The ways of empowerment of women by the western donors and their implementing NGOs cannot be feasible for the people some countries. Particularly, religious beliefs have different notion of empowerment of women than conventional empowerment. Bano (2009) brings an example in the context of Pakistani society where the traditional Madrasha institutions and religious beliefs are more dominant to the notion of empowerment than states as because of the limitation of state sponsored education and employment facilities.

Empowerment cannot be achieved just only implementing the empowerment programmes targeting women beneficiaries. Rao *et al*, (1991) rightly argue that empowerment for women requires involving women in planning and implementations of the project. The other groups in the society must be in a position to understand the need for women's empowerment from gender perspectives. It is very evident from the context of many developing countries that the male counterparts and policy makers consider empowerment as 'dirty word' which is used to get unfair professional advantage (Tawo *et al*, 2009)

## CONCLUSION

In order to determine the success of the programmes for the empowerment of women, we need to consider multiple issues in a given context. Not all empowerment programmes are successful in every spheres of the world and can empower every woman in the same programme. Microfinance may be successful in some context in the world but it is not a panacea to the obstacles of women's empowerment. At the same time, educating women could be a useful step to make the women more empowered but education without creating job and earning is not more effective at the end. Increasing the numbers of women representations in the national parliaments and local governments may be beneficial from the strategic point of view in empowering women. However, the increase does not necessarily correlate with the overall empowerment of poor women.

Empowerment is some extent related to the determination of the women themselves. Unless, they are firmly determined to be self-reliant, it is very difficult to bring changes in their status of empowerment. At the same time, there are many factors which are essential in order to empowerment of women. So at the end, we can say that the empowerment programmes significantly contribute to the women's empowerment but do not empower all women in all situations and equally.

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