

BARRIERS TO WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: A PHILOSOPHICAL EXPOSITION

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Abstract

Women empowerment, like gender equality is one of the contemporary issues bothering in the society. It can be defined as the process of enabling women to have access and make productive contributions to their economic independence, political participation and social development. In other words, an empowered woman is powerful and has power over discrimination and its likes in the society. This paper therefore makes an exposition and examination of the idea of women empowerment; pointing out the major constraints affecting the empowerment and development of women and the girl-child in all spheres of endeavors. This paper reveals article reveals a range of culturally different ideas on empowerment that emphasize the community. The article suggests and concludes holistic ways to rethink context-driven empowerment within broad-based notions of peace and security.

Keywords: Women, empowerment, gender equality, national development.

Introduction

Every human society has a norm and culture, that incorporates her way of living and doing all manner of things. In other words, norm and culture direct the affairs and activities of the members of any given society. The members of the society do not just want to exist, but to live. When human beings live, they live towards a common goal, which is centered on fulfilment and sustainable development. This development includes both human and infrastructural development. One cannot think of societal development, without the women who occupy a greater percentage of the societal population. There is no tool for development more effective than the development and empowerment of women. This article therefore calls women empowerment and for increased representation of women at all spheres of live; in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for growth, the prevention, management and resolution of conflict and sustainable development.

This paper therefore exposes the concept of women empowerment as well as some factors that affect the development and empowerment of women. Based on that, the questions become; what is women empowerment? Is it necessary to empowerment women? what exactly does women empowerment imply? Does the society actually need women, to actualize national and sustainable development? What are the challenges of empowering women. These questions and many of its kinds are the major concern of this paper.

Conceptualizing Women Empowerment

Many organizations and sects in the contemporary society are interested in sustainable, hence preach gender equality. One cannot be interested in women empowerment, without being interested in gender equality. Gender equality therefore is one of the facilitators of national and sustainable development. According to Osagi (2001: 54):

There is a dual rationale for promoting gender equality. Firstly, that equality between women and men - equal rights, opportunities and responsibilities – is a matter of human rights and social justice. And secondly, that greater equality between women and men is also a precondition for (and effective indicator of) sustainable people-centered development. The perceptions, interests, needs and priorities of both women and men must be taken into consideration not only as a matter of social justice but because they are necessary to enrich development processes.

However, it is also important to analyze the concept of empowerment, before looking at the concept of women empowerment. The term ‘empowerment’ is the process of gaining access to resources and developing people’s capacities in order to actively participate in shaping one’s own life and community in economic, social and political terms. According to Tam O’Neil, Pilar Domingo and Craig Valters (www.google.com), empowerment is the process by which a person gains the ability to make strategic life choices.

Traditionally, access to aid, education, and health care is seen as the best route to empowerment, but traditional responses often miss the ways in which power politics constrain access for women. Addressing gendered power relations that are legitimized by local traditions is a prerequisite to breaking down the stereotypical view that gender equals women, and women need set tools prescribed by Western development donors to achieve empowerment. Moreover, women empowerment is defined as a process of personal and social change through which women gain power, make meaningful choices and have control over their lives. In other words, empowerment of women entails, being able to make a contribution at all levels of society and not just in the home. According to Keshab Chandra Mandal (2013:33) Empowerment of women is not only essential but also imperative and crucial for all round development of a country and the nation as a whole. Sushama Sahay (1998), adds:

Empowerment is an active, multi-dimensional process which enables women to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life. It implies decentralization of power and authority in the deprived, oppressed and powerless people who have not been able to participate in decision making and implementation of policies and programs of both government organizations as well as in societal matters.,(p.23)

It is therefore evident that empowerment involves people, organization, or groups who are powerless or marginalized, become aware of the power dynamics at work in their life context, develop the skills and capacity for gaining some reasonable control over their lives, without infringing on the rights of others in their community. Sowjanya S. Shetty and V. B. Hans explain more (2015):

Empowerment enables the individuals to realize their identity and powers in all spheres of life. It consists of greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in making decisions or free from the shackles imposed on them by custom, belief and practices in the society, (30).

There are many pathways to women's empowerment but important enabling conditions include women's collective action, constitutional and legal reform, social and economic policy measures, and changes in socio-cultural norms. Hashemi and Schuler (1993) define the empowerment of women through the use of six spheres: sense of self and a vision of the future, including resisting negative behaviors of the husband; mobility and visibility, including how women are treated when they are traveling; economic security, including cash income, new skills and knowledge; status and decision making power within the household, including making purchases on their own; ability to interact effectively in the public sphere, such as joining credit programs, and participation in non-family groups, such as credit programs and solidarity movements.

According to Tam O'Neil, Pilar Domingo and Craig Valters(www.google.com), Women empowerment can take various forms. It could be individual or collective and can take place in different spheres of life, including:

Psychological empowerment – when women come to believe that they should be able to make or influence decisions that affect them and gain the confidence to act on this.

Political empowerment – when women gain the ability to influence the rules and norms that govern society and decisions about who gets what, when and how. This can be through public or private organizations and concern formal or informal (e.g. socio-cultural) rules/institutions, and at the household, community, subnational and national levels.

Social empowerment – when women gain the ability to make/influence decisions about their social interactions (e.g. mobility, association with others), reproduction, health and education.

Economic empowerment – when women gain the ability to make/influence and act on decisions about their participation in labour markets, their share of unpaid work and in the allocation and use of their own/their household's assets.

More so, empowerment of Women, formed in 2011 by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) has six main focus areas: violence against women, peace and security, leadership and participation, economic empowerment, national planning and budgeting. It is important to note that, power is at the center of empowerment, both semantically and in practical terms. Jo Rowlands (1997: 4) describes four types of power, each with implications for women's empowerment and their ability to advance personal and structural change.

1. Power over – the ability to control others. Changes in the distribution of power (e.g. when women gain power over men) are usually met with resistance and can result in new forms of domination and injustice.
2. Power to – the ability to exercise choice and change external conditions. Increasing women's individual capabilities is necessary if they are to contest and change power hierarchies (i.e. alter others' power over them).
3. Power with – the power that comes from collective action. Collective action increases women's solidarity and their ability to contest and change power structures.
4. Power within – increased critical consciousness and self-respect. A women's awareness of socially constructed identities and hierarchies, and her acceptance of herself and others as equals, are the basis of her desire for personal and structural change.

Factors that hinder Women Empowerment

Empowering women in the society is being affected by some constraints/factors. These factors that hinder women empowerment and development can vary across different societies, cultures and regions and they include: illiteracy/educational barrier, traditional gender role and stereotype, poverty, gender-based violence, early marriage amongst others.

Illiteracy: literacy, which is opposed to illiteracy is a person's first step in learning and knowledge building, hence, literacy is essential for any measurement of human development. The higher rate of illiteracy of women and inability to access quality education affect women empowerment. Educational barrier is one significant barrier to women empowerment. Despite progress in recent decades, many girls and women around the world still face challenges in accessing quality education. According to Bilal Taboor and Mayank Tomar (2023):

Limited access to quality education and skill-building opportunities can hinder women's economic empowerment. Without proper education and training, women may lack the skills and qualifications needed to access higher-paying jobs or start businesses. (p.477).

This educational barrier has far-reaching consequences for women's empowerment in various ways. also, when women cannot read and write and are not informed or exposed, they become deformed. As Francis Bacon says, "knowledge is power", any woman who is knowledgeable and informed is powerful and empowered. With attainment of education and knowledge women can overcome these problems. Even when girls have access to education, they may encounter disparities in resources, quality of schooling, and opportunities compared to boys.

Limited resources, gender biases in curricula and teaching practices, and inadequate infrastructure can hinder girls' learning experiences and limit their educational outcomes.

Poverty and illiteracy are intertwined with one another. Poor people are mostly uneducated or lowly educated. This mass of uneducated people feels one kind of powerlessness. They feel some invisible forces from outside are controlling their lives. This powerless and inferior attitude creates a sense of intimidation and lead to early marriages. As a result, women tend to depend on fortune, luck, destiny of men for survival. Traditional gender role and Stereotype is another factor. Traditional gender roles and stereotypes often limit women's choices and opportunities in the society. According to Bilal Taboor and Mayank Tomar (2023):

Traditional gender roles and stereotypes have long played a significant role in shaping societal expectations and perceptions regarding the roles and capabilities of women. These stereotypes limit women's opportunities and choices in both personal and professional spheres in several ways. Gender stereotypes can influence the aspirations and self-perception of women, discouraging them from pursuing careers in fields traditionally dominated by men, (p.444).

Traditional gender roles often place the primary responsibility for caregiving and household chores on women. This expectation can create a significant burden on women, limiting their ability to pursue full-time careers or professional advancement. Bilal Taboor and Mayank Tomar (2023) explain:

Gender stereotypes shape societal expectations regarding women's behavior, appearance, and interests. These expectations can lead to pressure to conform and limit women's ability to express themselves authentically or pursue activities outside of the prescribed gender norms. This restriction on personal choices can affect their overall well-being and sense of fulfilment,(473).

The assumption that women should prioritize family over their own aspirations reinforces the notion that their role is primarily within the domestic sphere. Women are often perceived as less competent or authoritative due to societal biases, leading to their under representation in positions of power. This limits their ability to influence policies, make important decisions, and shape the direction of organizations and institutions. This can lead to a lack of representation and diversity in various industries, perpetuating the cycle of limited opportunities for women.

Lack of Support and Mentor is another factor. The prevalence of gender stereotypes can result in a lack of support and mentorship for women in various fields. Limited access to role models and mentors who have successfully navigated traditionally male-dominated industries can hinder women's professional growth and development. Gender based violence affects women

empowerment. Gender based violence, including domestic violence, sexual harassment, and human trafficking can hinder women empowerment. Violence is the prime factor which opposes and hinders women's empowerment. Physical, emotional, mental torture and agony are deep rooted in the society from time immemorial. According to Bilal Taboor and Mayank Tomar (2023)

Women... are frequently subjected to various forms of violence, including physical attacks, harassment, and online abuse. These acts of violence and intimidation aim to silence and discourage women from participating in politics, creating a hostile and unsafe environment, (474).

The fear of violence may restrict women's mobility and limit their participation in various aspects of the society. Early marriage is another factor. Early marriage results in drop-outs from school and poverty. This particular factor has destroyed so many women; by exposing them to disease/infections, psychological disorder and eventual premature death.

Evaluation and Conclusion

Having analyzed the concept of women empowerment and the barriers, it is evident that it is necessary for national and sustainable development. Empowerment is not something that can be done to or for women alone. In other words, empowerment is not just a woman's issues but that of the entire society. Women form the society through motherhood, hence occupy a greater percentage of the human population.

Women are the agents of their empowerment. Since It is associated with human right, choice, autonomy, power, self-efficiency and control, there is the need for women to change their perception of themselves and on their empowerment must be changed. They should also strive to change their image as weak, dependent, passive and try to become independent, active, strong and determined human beings.

To contribute to progress and development of women, women, the local, state, federal government and the international community should support the political actions of women to change gender and other power hierarchies. It is said that educated mothers educate family which results in educated nation/population, thereby building a strong nation. In other words, education is capable of increasing women's sense of analyzing which will support wider reforms in support of gender equality. Education therefore is the key factor for women empowerment, prosperity, development and welfare.

However, the government as well as agencies should set up programs that is geared educating and empowering women. Some of these include introducing satellite schools for remote hamlets, ICT facilities and the use of internet, for the study and research by women. When this is done, it inculcates in women the confidence that positive change is possible. There is the need to encourage and ensure socio-economic participation of women in local and international

fora. Hence, women should actively participate in social and political activities. Affirmative action is therefore important for women development and empowerment.

Child bearing at young ages should be prevented by preventing early marriages. This however boils down to mothers changing the narratives, especially on how to raise the girl-child that, the essence of woman existence is not solely on motherhood. Women have a lot to achieve beyond motherhood. Awareness needs to be generated regarding the necessity of educating girls so as to prepare them to contribute effectively to the socio-economic development of the nation. Eliminating all forms of discrimination in employment especially to eliminate wage differentials between men and women. In order to change the attitudes towards female education and to raise the social consciousness of the country, a conscious strategic change is required in national media and communication effort.

Self-awareness, discovery and consciousness is very necessary for empowerment. In other words, women should have the ability to live a strategic life and also develop their capacities so as to actualize their potentials as humans. When this is done, they become empowered, and have authority to stand against intimidation, victimization, gender-based violence and discrimination. When all these are done, there would be national and sustainable development, hence the society would be an *Eldorado* of virtue.

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