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WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AS AGENCY EXPANSION

Manjari Shukla
PhD Research Scholar, Centre for the Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy, Jawaharlal Nehru University

ABSTRACT
Women empowerment as a truism has been furthered as the way to solving multiplicity of problems from poverty to other systemic disadvantages faced by women. This empowerment however lacks definitional clarity for people tend to project their own evaluative judgements on how they view empowerment. For some it is an outcome while for others it is a process culminating into a wholesome end. Capability approach also theorizes empowerment in terms of agency as it emphasizes on the active participation of the agent in their own empowerment. Amartya Sen in his formulation of capabilities as the freedom to pursue valued functionings, goes on to characterize the ways in which the freedom is achieved as agency freedom and well-being freedom.
KEYWORDS: *Women empowerment; capability approach; poverty; freedom; agency*

Women as the 'other'

> Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being... She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the other.[1] (Simone de Beauvoir, 1997)

Women in a country like India have been historically and systemically oppressed by the larger society, one that is intrinsically patriarchal in its very weave. Such societies see women in relation to men and not as 'absolute' like men. The processes that render women powerless in the larger functioning and course of the society, eventually result in negative externalities like the othering of women. They are not seen as one of the two halves but the 'other' half, othered not just in their existence but their very being. The othering has not followed the identity formation of women but in reality the identity formation has been premised upon this othering. As rightly pointed by Spivak (1985) defining "the other"[2] is a way of defining "the self". The process of othering and eventual exclusion of women like all dynamic social processes is multidimensional and intersectional[3] in nature as this othering isn't only an outside-in phenomenon but one that takes place even within groups.[4] The 'otherness' that women are subjected to isn't one based on differences but one based on hierarchies. This identity formation renders

[1] Simone De Beauvoir, 1997. The second sex.

[2] The term was first introduced by Gayatri Spivak Chakravarty (1985) in her essay "The Rani of Sirmur", in relation to the colonial process of 'othering' where the British colonizers by way of various means of power made sure to keep apart the subjects (Indians) from being anything like them.

[3] Intersectionality is a concept introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) which came as a response to the often ignored simultaneity of various identities and essentialization of identities in the either/or frame that potentially leaves out sections situated at the bottom of both the groups

[4] {Men 'other' [women, (upper caste women 'other' Dalit women) (Hindu women 'other' Muslim women)]

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women powerless and is manifested in forms of disadvantages like feminization of poverty[5].

However the fact that poverty with its narrow definition as 'lack of income' also came under scrutiny in the later decades with Sen (1979) professing a more holistic way of looking at poverty as more than just income deprivation and as 'capability failure'[6]. Capability is defined as "the freedom to pursue valued beings and doings known as functionings". In this sense feminization of poverty can be theorized, as Fukuda Parr (1999) asserts, as 'not just the lack of income'. As is also rightly argued by Razavi (1999) and cited in Chant (2006)[7]

> From a gender perspective, broader concepts of poverty are more useful than a focus purely on household income levels because they allow a better grasp of the multi-dimensional aspects of gender disadvantage, such as lack of power to control important decisions that affect one's life (Razavi 1999 cited in Chant, 2006 pp. 203)

Women, subjugated in every sense, be it in the traditional sense of poverty as assetlessness or the more all-encompassing understanding as capability deprivation, often as a result of these processes suffer through the lack of freedom to be able to make their own life decisions and chart their own course of life. This lack, both of tangible and intangible means, further embeds them in the loop of powerlessness and renders them intrinsically poor.

The idea of empowerment needs to be grounded in Sen's capability approach and the incapability of women towards achieving the lives that they value and enjoying the freedom to act and be the way they wish to be is what seems missing in the discourse on poverty. Talking just about the outcome, that the poverty is 'feminized' and that women form the larger chunk of poor and not paying attention to the process that leads to this outcome, for instance their disadvantaged position in the social order (leading to their capability failures), the intra-household discrimination[8] etc, is bound to be futile.

Thus the pauperisation is not a matter of concern merely because it renders women devoid of assets to sustain themselves but about what Nussbaum and Sen both in their own rights talk about, that is the capability deprivation that it entails. So, it's not merely about the unfreedoms[9] in the form of material deprivation but also about the depletion of 'internal capabilities'[10]. As rightly pointed by Nussbaum (2000),

> All too often women are not treated as ends in their own right, persons with a dignity that deserves respect from laws and institution. Instead they are treated as mere instruments of the ends of the others- reproducers, caregivers, sexual outlets, agents of a family's general prosperity (Nussbaum. 2000)

This puts women into a disabling arena, wherein their contributions are extremely undermined both in the labor market as well as their reproductive roles as mothers and in the household. Also, if we go by the dimensions of well-being in fig 1 we see that women face greater chances of failing in most of these well-being counts and eventually on the count of agency as well. Knowing that the latter has both intrinsic and instrumental relevance, the lack of it will be disempowering for women. Not being able to take your own decisions or participate in achieving the end that you value is manifested in 'the poverty of lives' for the women.

Defining Empowerment: Empowerment as Agency Expansion

Empowerment is often used as a truism and is seen more as an outcome than a process, and moreso in case of women. Empowerment is one such aspect that has existed without one standard set of

[5] Originally used by Diana Pearce (1978) to refer to the phenomenon of increasing instances of female headed households falling prey to poverty

[6] The idea has been at the centre of capability approach which is the brainchild of Amartya Sen (1978) and is pathbreaking in that it sees disadvantages like poverty in more intangible terms like failure of freedoms to pursue valued ends

[7] Chant, Sylvia (2006) *Revisiting the 'feminisation of poverty' and the UNDP gender indices: what case for a gendered poverty index?* New series working paper, 18. LSE Gender Institute, London School of Economics and Political Science, London UK pp 3-4

[8] In the form of differential distribution of power within the household

[9] The term unfreedom is used in Sen's work 'Development as Freedom' (1999) and it refers to various disadvantages that hamper one's development like poverty, famine, lack of political rights

[10] Martha Nussbaum in her book "Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach" differentiates between 'basic capabilities', 'internal capabilities' and 'combined capabilities'; the basic capabilities are the natural, innate capabilities of a person like capability to hear and see; the internal capabilities are the capabilities that are requisite for performing a certain functions and unlike the basic capability are advanced states of pursuing the functions; combined capabilities on the other hand are the internal capability that get the requisite external support and are manifested in various ways.

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definitions, a checklist, and its definition is often what one wishes it to be making it a function of ones own evaluative judgements. Empowerment for the purpose of this paper would be defined in terms of capability approach which puts emphasis on the agency aspect of women to empower them in more effective way. The conventional definitions of empowerment also include the aspect of agency in one way or another (United Nations; World Development Report (2001))

Sen (1985) in his lecture titled 'Well-being, Agency and Freedom' posited the duality of the aspects of 'well-being' and 'agency' and that both forward their own distinct notions of freedom. While the 'well-being aspect' forwards a rather narrow one dimensional idea of one's own advantage, agency aspect is follows a more holistic, general idea of freedom, which allows one to have and follow one's own conception of good. Sen (1992) further divides agency into Realized Agency Success (RAS) and Instrumental Agency Success (IAS). In the case of RAS, there is an 'occurrence of those things that one values and one aims at achieving', in IAS 'the occurrence was brought by one's *own* efforts (or, in the bringing about of which one has *oneself* played an active part)'[11]. The latter aspect of Instrumentalagency success in which one plays an active role is valued over the one where things come about by chance or by others' efforts simply for the reason that in the former, the potent side of one's agency is at display and is materialised in the form of not just the achievement of the goal, but also its pursuit. Agency in itself thus forms a very central aspect in the definitions of empowerment. Kabeer's (1999) definition of agency also centers around the idea of authority and self-determination of goals which further invokes upon what the author calls 'the power within' which is manifested in the form of 'bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis' (Kabeer, 1999). Other scholars also follow a similar ideation of empowerment with an acknowledgement of the role of agency in defining it. Agency takes many forms in these definitions, for instance, Jejeebhoy (2000) sees empowerment as autonomy and control of women over their own lives; Kabeer (1999) provides a definition of empowerment wherein she sees it as 'expansion in people's ability to make strategic life **choices,** in a context where this ability was denied to them' (emphasis added); Sen (1993) defines empowerment in relation to altering relations of **power.** All these terms, in one way or the other, relate to the celebrated aspect of agency and even call for the redistribution of power and authority. Alkire (2005) even goes as far as to categorize empowerment to be a subset of agency (see table 1)

[11] Sen, A (1992), Inequality Reexamined. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

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Table 1 Dimensions of agency and empowerment

Agency	Empowerment
People's ability to act on behalf of what matters to them (their conception of good)	A subset of agency, that focuses on the instrumental aspect of agency
Characteristics of agency • **Is part of one's own well-being (intrinsic value)** • Can cause positive change in some dimensions of one's well-being (instrumental value) • Can create further changes one values (instrumental value) • May conflict with other dimensions of one's well being	**Methods of increasing empowerment** • Access to information, participation/inclusion, accountability, local organizational capacity

Source- Based on [Alkire(2005)]

CONCLUSION

Women empowerment in its very ideation is seen as somewhat of a truism, as a panacaeatic response to the disadvantages faced by women due to their social positioning. These disadvantages manifest in the form of poverty which further hampers the capability of women to pursue valued goals. As the paper elucidates, empowerment should be seen as agency expansion wherein agency is defined as 'having one's own conception of good and being able to pursue it' (Kabeer, 1999). The power to take the levers of one's life in their own hands and follow whatever beings and doings one wishes to achieve has an intrinsic value in itself. Agency ensures that one is an active agent in their own upliftment and not just a passive beneficiary. This empowerment as agency expansion also flows from inside out, with what Kabeer (1999) calls 'power within' and thus is lasting in its impact and ensures sustenance. The paper thus professes to see empowerment as an intrinsic process and not as necessarily a change in tangible conditions since tangible resources are only means to achieving more valued intangible ends of empowerment. The agency achievement kicks start a positive loop of further valued externalities of empowerment.

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