

Women Empowerment and Autonomy_A Conceptual Review

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Abstract

Empowerment refers to the process of transforming power relations from hierarchical structures to an egalitarian one by enabling the powerless to create and exercise power from within. Understanding this critical dimension is of utmost importance in discussing women empowerment in the context of sustainable development goals. This paper attempts to present an insightful review of the concept of empowerment and autonomy of women and the determinants thereof. Using secondary sources from 1990s onwards this research paper has emerged with the conclusion that women empowerment being a multidimensional concept has to be examined as such; the empowerment in one dimension does not necessarily translate into another; the empowerment and autonomy is conditioned and moulded by regional and cultural context and the enablers like education and employment are not universally effective in bringing about the transformation in women's position vis a vis the family and society.

Key words- *women empowerment, autonomy, sustainable development goal,*

Introduction

Women's empowerment as a concept has gained traction in the recent past with the adoption of Gender Equality as a Sustainable Development Goal 5. However, the terms women empowerment and women's autonomy i.e. the independent decision making power of women has been a critical area of interest and research in social sciences. This article aims at presenting a review of literature on the issue of women empowerment and autonomy. Based on the review of secondary sources, this article contributes to the examination of the concept, its dimensions and enablers. It is an attempt to provide an extensive survey of literature to facilitate more research avenues in future and examine various critical nuances of the concept.

Thematic Discussion

The following is a critical review of concept and measurement of women's empowerment and its various measures. Dharmalingam A and S. Philip Morgan (1996) have examined two geographical locations with different employment opportunities influencing women's autonomy and demographic outcomes. They have concluded that a setting which provides an independent source of income, freedom of movement, and greater interaction with other women creates greater autonomy for women as compared to women engaged in housework or agricultural activities. Niraula Bhanu B. and S. Philip Morgan (1996) have measured women's autonomy as freedom of movement and household decision-making. It is found that that individual-level autonomy is influenced by freedom of movement, community settings like patriarchy, kin relationships and resources from natal families. Mason, Karen Oppenheim, (1997) has maintained that family characteristics and women's position within the household influence their domestic power

and autonomy South and Southeast Asian societies. Women's autonomy is examined in the context of their economic decisions, freedom of movement and control by the spouse. Southeast Asian economies have exhibited higher autonomy for women than the South Asian economies highlighting the patriarchal social and familial structures. The study concludes that the social context i.e. a more liberal and supportive social environment has a strong role in determining women's autonomy, especially enhancing their economic decision-making power and freedom of movement as against the restrictive gender and family traditions.

Malhotra Anju and Mark Mather (1997) have examined the relationship between multi-dimensional nature of empowerment and its relation with education and employment in a study conducted in Sri Lanka. They conclude that the women's autonomy in household is mediated by a wider social context. Casique, I. (2000) has studied and confirmed a positive relationship between women's decision-making power and autonomy and the use of contraception among Mexican women. M. Hemanta Meitei (2001) has examined the effect of education, earning or access to resources on women's decision making power. He has concluded that the work status provides a greater explanation of the autonomy than education. Jejeebhoy Shireen J & Zeba A. Sathar (2001), have measured women's autonomy in India and Pakistan pointing to a significant dissimilarity in the extent and factors of women's autonomy in these regions. Gender specific social settings, economic activity and education levels explain the differential autonomy in the northern and southern regions of the continent. Thus a measure of autonomy that assimilates a cultural context needs to be developed. Jejeebhoy Shireen J. (2002) explores the perceptions

of rural Indian women and their husbands with regard to various dimensions of women's autonomy and whether these perceptions affect the reproductive outcomes like adoption of contraceptive. Mason, K. O., & Smith, H. L. (2003) have studied measures of women's empowerment in the household including the freedom to make economic decisions, the family-size decisions freedom of movement and spousal control through coercion. The study has concluded that the community traits influence the women's autonomy more than the individual characteristics.

Handy and Kassam (2004) have found that education coupled with the exposure to the working in NGOs is proved to be a significant enabler of women's autonomy. Alaka Malwade Basu and Gayatri Brij Koolwal (2005), have discussed the concept of unproductive autonomy reflecting some measure of doing things for oneself like visits to friends and keeping personal savings claiming that women empowerment must include an ability to look after themselves as well as the family members. Their study has concluded that a greater decision making power is expected to increase household welfare but not necessarily their own. Anderson Siwan and Mukesh Eswaran (2005), have established a more direct relationship between women's decision making and bargaining power within family and the earned income rather than unearned income also highlighting the issue of control over income. Agarwala, Rina, Lynch, Scott M. (2006) have analysed the women's autonomy as freedom from violence, a say in family decisions, involvement in community action and participation in economic decisions at home. It is concluded that the measurement of autonomy is conditioned by its multidimensional character and the cultural contexts. Sen, Rastogi and Vanneman (2006) analyse women's autonomy in developing societies exploring the extent to which women's decision making power is compromised due to her spouse and other family members. They have concluded that work status and endogamy have favourable impact on women's decision making power vis a vis the in laws. Roy Sanchari (2008) has examined and established the positive the impact of inheritance on women empowerment through increased bargaining power for them especially when the inherited property supports the spousal occupation. Acharya Yubraj (2008) has studied the relationship between women's education and their involvement in decision making in multiple household context like purchases, healthcare. He has concluded that the effects of education on autonomy vary with the type of decisions and the levels of education. Kishor Sunita and Kamla Gupta (2009) have analysed the

NFHS III data examining the women's participation in household decisions about spending and controlling their income, and have reported that the working women's participation is greater when their income level is same as their husbands. On an average the proportion of women who participate in family decisions remain less than two third.

Kabeer (1999; 2005) has explored the concept of empowerment in terms of availability of alternatives and the visibility of such alternatives along with the power to exercise such alternatives. Challenging the pre-existing power relations, exercising the choice and creating transformative agency are the critical elements of empowerment highlighted in Kabeer's work.

The National Family and Health Survey 5 has provided some valuable insights into women's empowerment measured as freedom of movement, economic freedom and access to microcredit, control over personal and spousal income, and other forms of decision making autonomy, The NFHS V survey also presents data on prevalence of domestic violence and its various manifestations in the marital relationships further reflecting on various facets of empowerment.

Conclusion

Women's empowerment and their autonomy in decision making is a critical issue in women studies. As a part of SDGs, this goal of gender equality takes shape in the form of greater autonomy for women in social, cultural and economic context. While the necessity of promoting and building enabling structures that facilitate the empowerment process is indeed vital, it is important that the empowerment should not be seen as an isolated objective. As societies do not operate in a vacuum, the conceptualisation of empowerment and autonomy has to be undertaken in a context sensitive manner. This is especially true when the social and cultural structures that surround us differ greatly in their forms, practices, notions and orientation about women empowerment.

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