



International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)

A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal

ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)

ISJN: A4372-3142 (Online) ISJN: A4372-3143 (Print)

Volume-X, Issue-VI, November 2024, Page No.150-159

Published by Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711

Website: <http://www.ijhsss.com>

DOI: 10.29032/ijhsss.v10.i6.016

Women Empowerment: Meaning, Approaches, and Indicators

Arup Kr Roy

*Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Gour Mahavidyalya, Mangalbari,
West Bengal, India*

Received: 19.11.2024; Accepted: 28.11.2024; Available online: 30.11.2024

©2024 The Author(s). Published by Scholar Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Abstract:

In the mid-1980s, the concept of empowerment began to gain popularity in development-related fields, especially in terms of women. Empowerment tends to represent the terms 'public welfare, development, mass participation, poverty alleviation' in describing development goals in grassroots-level policies and programs. Women in our society are still not known for their own identity. They are known or identified by their male administrators inside and outside the family. Empowerment has become a major solution to social problems such as high population growth, environmental degradation, and low status of women. At the same time, the concept of empowerment also emerges as a theoretical and practical conflict. In the 1990s, when terms such as 'participation', 'consultation', 'partnership' etc. began to enter development thinking, the emphasis shifted to an 'enabling' perspective. In this context, the concept of women's empowerment becomes more popular.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment, Power, Feminists, Approach, Indicators, Resources, Control.

Introduction: The concept of Empowerment is complicated to measure or define. There is no single approach to this subject. Empowerment should be understood and defined by indicators. Empowerment is a process. It is not a process that can be gifted or transferred to people. Over the past four decades, the practice of empowerment in various sectors and services has emerged from the efforts to develop more effective and sensitive services for women, black people, and other exploited groups. These methods of practice aim to understand the personal and social problems that disempowerment creates and sustains. The purpose of these practices is distinguished by its emphasis on the development of critical awareness, the enhancement of individual and collective capabilities, and the development of skills for personal, interpersonal, or social change among the downtrodden for solving

their problems. In our increasingly diverse society, empowerment has emerged as a vision of practice, which is synonymous with uniqueness and diversity.

The remarkable feature of the word empowerment is that it is associated with the concept of 'power'. Srilata Batliwala says "*The process of challenging existing power relations, and of gaining greater control over the sources of power, may be termed as empowerment*"¹ This is the broad meaning of empowerment. Examples of such definitions can be found in discussions of feminist writers. According to feminist writers, empowerment generally means the manifestation of the re-distribution of power, which challenges patriarchal ideologies and male dominance in the prevailing society. It is simultaneously a process and a result of a process. It is that process for changing those structures and institutions that put into force the inequality and perpetuates the same.

In the mid-1980s, the concept of empowerment began to gain popularity in development-related fields, especially in terms of women. Srilata Batliwala says that empowerment tends to represent the terms 'public welfare, development, mass participation, poverty alleviation' in describing development goals in grassroots-level policies and programs. Empowerment becomes a major solution to social problems such as high rate of population growth, environmental degradation, low social status of women, etc. At the same time, the concept of empowerment also emerges as a theoretical and practical debate. In the 1990s, when terms such as 'participation', 'consultation', 'partnership' etc. began to enter into the sphere of development thinking, the emphasis shifted to an 'enabling' approach to development or empowerment. It is in this context that the concept of empowerment becomes more popular.

Discussions about empowerment date back to the 1960s. However, in most cases, the word 'power' is not given much attention. However, a discussion of empowerment cannot be complete without an analysis of power. According to the *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics*, power is "*The ability to make people (or things) do what they would not otherwise have done*"². Power is a type of relationship by which one can influence others according to one's own will. M. Parenti says power can generally be defined in two ways³. (a) '*The ability to get what one wants*' and (b) "*The ability to influence others to think, feel, act, and/or believe in ways that further one's interests*" This relational concept is reflected in two types of abilities. Personal and social power. Personal power depends on the perception of self-efficacy. The powerful person knows how to get what he wants and influence others in favour of his interests. On the other hand, a personally powerless and weak individual avoids challenging activities and avoids difficult situations either because he does not get what he wants or because he cannot influence others in his interests. Social power, on the other hand, derives from the social resources that individuals bring to their reciprocal relationships. In addition to personal and social powers, many emphasize political power. Political power can be defined in this way--- '*Who determines, who gets what or influences*

¹ Batliwala Srilata, *The Meaning of Women's Empowerment*, Women's World, delhi, 1995, pp23

² Mclean Iain, *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics*. Oxford University Press, New York, 1996, p396.

³ Parenti M. in Martha Chen's Eds, *Women and Empowerment*, Discovery Publishing House, New Delhi, 1998, p19.

whom⁴ so political power belongs only to those who determine policy and set a standard to realize it.

H. M. Hemlata says, 'Power is the ability of one person or group to get another person or group to do something against their will.' Hence, Hemlata has spoken about personal power as well as group power in this case in a different way.

Power is the key to the term empowerment which means "control over mundane resources, intellectual resources and ideology"⁵. The earthly resources over which control is sought may be of various kinds. Like water, forest, humanitarian organization, labor, money etc. Knowledge, information, ideas, etc. are intellectual assets. Control over ideology, on the other hand, depends on the ability to develop, disseminate, sustain, and institutionalize particular types of beliefs, principles, values, mindsets, activities, behaviors, etc.

A verb is formed with the prefix "em" and a noun "power". According to Webster's New World Dictionary (1982) the prefix "em" is used to form a verb meaning to make, make into or like, cause to be. So to empower means to make or cause one to be powerful, however, the definition of empowerment depends on many other things, such as (a) giving power or authority, (b) to make enable to do something or to achieve something.

One thing that is clear from all these definitions is that empowerment is a process of giving power or allowing power to be acquired. But merely handing over power to those who have no power is not empowerment. It is not entirely acceptable that any person or group will only be the recipient of power given by others. So the process of empowerment needs to be such that the powerless can empower themselves on their own. All techniques associated with the process of empowerment must depend upon the realization of the causes of powerlessness and or be based on building one's capacity to overcome that powerlessness. It means that if a person or a group is powerless they have to realise and they have to remove it accordingly depending upon their capacity. In this case, external help or support like government policies or activities of Non-Governmental organisations are important, but they have to play the main role in empowering themselves.

Empowerment is the process by which power is acquired, power is developed, and power is made available. Martha Chen says "An individual or group moves from a condition of relative powerlessness to relative power through the empowerment process"⁶.

In addition to increasing the political, social, or economic power of an individual or group, spiritual power is also said to increase. According to Wikipedia "Empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social or economic strength of individual or community"⁷. Emphasis is also placed on the own belief and trust of the person or persons to be empowered. The process of empowerment must always begin at the individual level

⁴ Chen Martha, Eds, *Women and Empowerment*, Discovery Publishing House, New Delhi, 1998, p19.

⁵ Ibid.p93

⁶ Chen Martha, Eds, *Women and Empowerment*, Discovery Publishing House, New Delhi, 1998, p21

⁷ www.ijcrt.org © 2018 IJCRT | Volume 6, Issue 2 April 2018 | ISSN: 2320-2882,16.11.2024

before it can spread to the societal level. Through that, social change will come, naturally. Therefore, the process of empowerment is seen as "*Stimulating a process of social change that enables the people to exert greater influence in the socio-economic and political arena*"⁸ Empowerment means creating a condition where Various issues like people's occupation, education, home, health services, leadership formation, women's organization, ending deprivation of downtrodden people, etc. are being raised and political tendencies are being developed on those issues. Adequacy of people's choices and options regarding these issues is an essential component of empowerment strategies.

In the context of the above discussion about empowerment, it can be said that empowerment is a process that enables an individual or group to gain power and authority over other individuals, institutions, or society. That is, the process of empowerment depends on some abilities or capabilities.

Based on what has been discussed so far about the concept of empowerment some such abilities or capabilities can be mentioned which are the essence of the empowerment process –

- (a) Capacity to make own decisions;
- (b) The right to information and resources by which appropriate decisions can be made;
- (c) The presence of multiple options from which to determine the correct choice or alternative (not only yes/no, either/or neither);
- (d) Opportunity to express opinions in the collective decision-making process;
- (e) Positive mindset on the ability to change;
- (f) The ability to acquire skills to improve one's individual capacity or group capacity;
- (g) The ability to change the perception of others through democratic means;
- (h) Engage in processes of change and development that are never-ending and self-initiated;
- (j) Development of own positive self-image and ability to overcome stigma;
- (j) Development of critical thinking skills to choose right, and wrong. And so on...

Women empowerment: Women in our society are still not known for their own identity. They are known or identified by their male administrators inside and outside the family. Being born as a girl child makes them a vulnerable group. There are few opportunities for education for them. Women represent about fifty percent of the world's total population but only 30 percent of the official workforce; They perform 60 percent of work time, but earn only 10 percent of all world income and own less than 1 percent of the wealth⁹.

The issue of women's empowerment has become relevant in the context of removing all these barriers liberating women from male subjugation and making them equal human beings.

⁸ Ravi R Venkat, Reddy V. Narayana, Venkatramana M., Eds, Empowerment of People: Grassroots Strategies and Issues, Kaniska Publishers, New Delhi,2002 (in introduction)

⁹ Chen Martha, Eds, *Women and Empowerment*, Discovery Publishing House, New Delhi,1998, p3
Volume-X, Issue-VI

Their role is not only confined to home workers or reproductive members of society but also extends to the larger arena of society. In this context, the term women empowerment is more applicable to vulnerable groups like women. The term empowerment is often used interchangeably with the concepts of women's welfare, women's development, women's participation, women's advancement, etc., but the concept of empowerment in general is not synonymous with these. It is a larger concept and has to be addressed broadly.

The theorists draw our attention to an important question: What causes the subjugation and deprivation of particular powerless groups? Similarly, empowerment practitioners are keen to take up the challenge of empowering vulnerable groups. They search for the best way to remove the causes of subjugation of these groups. Among the vulnerable groups they speak of, women are one and perhaps the most important. It is in this context that the issue of women's empowerment becomes more relevant.

As mentioned earlier, the concept of empowerment is closely related to the concept of power. Feminist analysis of this power provides a broader explanation of empowerment. Because feminists transcend formal and institutional definitions. Feminists therefore believe that empowerment does not mean only participation in the decision-making process. Empowerment necessarily requires the process by which those to be empowered feel they have legitimate decision-making power and are empowered to make decisions. Therefore, feminist analysis of power refers to two types of power, "power to" and "power from within" While analyzing empowerment from the perspective of women, Hake Holly M. says "... it is restructuring of gender relation within both family and society at large and it is society's recognition of women's equality with men in terms of their worth to society as independent person"¹⁰. The issue of women's empowerment is also associated with the expansion of choices in personal life in education, employment, marriage, etc. According to J.K. Pillai, "Empowerment is an active multifaceted process that enables women to realize their full identity and potential in every sphere of life"¹¹. Kamla Bhasin questions why is women's empowerment important. She believes women's empowerment is important because women have led us and will continue to lead us in our quest for a world free of war and violence¹². Women have led environmental movements around the world. She also believes that sustainable development must be women-centric. Historically, even now, women have taken care of basic social needs. Like food, shelter, fuel, nutrition, etc. Kamala Bhasin has identified several meanings of women's empowerment.¹³

¹⁰ Hake Holly M. in Eds, Ravi R Venkat, Reddy V. Narayana, Venkatramana M. *Empowerment of People: Grassroots Strategies and Issues*, Kaniska Publishers, New Delhi,2002, p25

¹¹ Hemlata H.M. *Empowerment of Women: A perspective* in Eds, , Ravi R Venkat, Reddy V. Narayana, Venkatramana M. *Empowerment of People: Grassroots Strategies and Issues*, Kaniska Publishers, New Delhi,2002, p6

¹² Bhasin Kamla, in Eds, Chen, Martha, *Women and Empowerment* Discovery Publishing House, New Delhi, 1998.p9

¹³ Ibid. p9

- Empowerment means recognition of women's contribution, and knowledge of women;
- It means helping women fight their own fears, inadequacy and inferiority;
- It means that women can express their self-respect and dignity,
- It means women are in control of their bodies;
- It means women becoming economically independent and self-reliant;
- This means women are establishing control over land and property;
- It means reducing women's workload, especially in the home;
- It means the formation and strengthening of women's groups and women's organizations.

And the list is not exhausted...

One of the main aspects of women's empowerment is their economic independence. Economic empowerment requires establishing control over land resources, equal opportunities for employment, equal wages for equal work, the opportunity to spend their earnings, etc. However economic empowerment is not the only aspect of women empowerment. Judging by the status of women at home and work, it can be said that only increasing income or receiving some money cannot improve their socio-economic status. Political empowerment is also needed for that. "Economic empowerment needs to go along with political empowerment, which could improve their bargaining power both in the household and at work"¹⁴ In addition to economic and political empowerment, it is also very important to empower them socially and they must have the opportunity, ability and awareness to acquire information in various fields.

Social recognition is very important for social empowerment. Above all, what is important is the expansion of their role in decision-making in various fields. Women's empowerment requires individual self-empowerment of women as well as collective participation to achieve something. Empowerment of women requires equality of opportunity, an end to gender discrimination, and equality among ethnic groups, social classes, and different age groups. That is why Martha Chen said, "*Empowerment is an essential starting point and a continuing process for realizing the ideals of human liberation and freedom for all*"¹⁵. Another important aspect of women's empowerment is the expansion of maternity facilities and the presence of facilities for child welfare.

Women's empowerment is not and cannot be separated from the empowerment of nature, the empowerment of all marginalized people and countries. In the same way, women's empowerment is indispensable in peace movements, environmental movements, working-class movements, human rights movements, and movements for the democratization and decentralization of society. The issue of women's empowerment is also linked to avoiding

¹⁴ Dassgupta Sukti, *Women Organising for Socio-economic Security*, The Indian Journal of Labour Economics, Vol. 46, No.1,2003, p39

¹⁵ Chen Martha, Eds, *Women and Empowerment*, Discovery Publishing House, New Delhi,1998, p10
Volume-X, Issue-VI

criminal tendencies and cruelty towards women. Besides, improvement of education, health, etc. is equally important. The most important issue is the change in the structure of male-female relations in society. Society needs an end to patriarchy. "Empowerment of women would necessarily mean redefining the notions of femininity and masculinity, changing man-women relationship."¹⁶

The concept of empowerment in general or women empowerment, whatever it is, given the above discussion it can be said that the idea of empowerment is closely related to power and control over resources and self. Equality, decision-making power, gaining morale, developing productive capacity, challenging conventional power relations, and gaining control over resources are some of the important elements that an individual or a group can achieve through the empowerment process. Empowerment can sometimes bring negative effects as well. As such, male-female conflict may develop when there is a shift in gender relations. Men have to lose something they have enjoyed for a long time. So men may have something to lose through women's empowerment.

Approaches To Women's Empowerment: Many approaches have been developed around women's empowerment. A multifaceted approach to women's empowerment can be found. Srilata Battiwala in her research on women's empowerment in South Asia in the early 1990s distinguished between three types of non-governmental organization approaches¹⁷: integrated development approach, economic approach, and awareness and consciousness-raising cum organizing approach. Integrated Rural Development Programs (IRDP) identifies some factors that cause women's disempowerment such as their lack of education, low economic status, inadequacy of resources, and poor decision-making skills. Those who seek to promote women's empowerment through economic intervention identify women's low economic status and resulting dependency as the cause of women's disempowerment. Those who talk about women's empowerment through awareness building and organizing women see women's disempowerment based on a complex interplay of various 'factors', i.e., historical, cultural, social, economic, and political.

H. M. Hemlata mentions a multifaceted approach to women's empowerment. She talked about five types of approaches¹⁸ these are (a) educational approach (b) economic approach (c) developmental approach (d) consciousness-raising approach, and (e) Organizational approach. Moreover, according to Hemlata, political participation can also be a point of view.

(a) Educational approach: The illiteracy rate among women has become a constraint on their development and empowerment. As a result, gender equality is not possible to achieve. Education is generally considered the main means for women's empowerment. Education

¹⁶ Chen Martha, Eds, *Women and Empowerment*, Discovery Publishing House, New Delhi, 1998, p12

¹⁷ Batliwala Srilata, *The Meaning of Women's Empowerment*, Women's World, delhi, 1995, p4

¹⁸ Hemlata H.M. *Empowerment of Women: A perspective* in Eds, Ravi R Venkat, Reddy V. Narayana, Venkatramana M. *Empowerment of People: Grassroots Strategies and Issues*, Kaniska Publishers, New Delhi, 2002, p16

increases awareness, helps in acquiring knowledge and information; helps the woman to interpret and evaluate her situation, and above all gives her the courage to change that situation. So the first approach to women's empowerment is to make women literate and educated. Literacy and education open up opportunities for women to acquire new information and at the same time explore new, fresh ways of thinking. Educated women are at an advantage in terms of marriage, number of children, children's education, and economic independence. Empowerment through education can therefore ensure greater participation of women in political and economic activities and increase their choices and opportunities.

(b) Economic approach: The economic perspective begins with a focus on women's 'work' and a re-evaluation of that work. One of the main reasons for the vulnerable status of women is their unpaid or low-paid work. Lack of control over earthly resources; lack of education, skills, training, etc. causes economic insecurity in women. Therefore, control over resources, skill enhancement through training, savings, credit facilities, etc. are particularly essential for their economic empowerment. It is also very important for those who earn to have control over their income.

Women's organizations, group activities, financial support, encouragement of self-employment, etc. are economic empowerment strategies.

(c) Developmental approach: The developmental perspective calls for the inclusion of women in the development process. This approach emphasizes poverty alleviation by first meeting basic needs. But later emphasis was placed on eliminating gender discrimination, so as to increase the self-reliance of women. Gender inequality also started to gain importance in development planning and development activities. The developmental approach views women's disempowerment in terms of widespread poverty and lack of access to health education, and important resources for women. This approach emphasizes various services and economic and social status.

(d) Consciousness-raising approach: This perspective holds that women's empowerment requires women's awareness of empowerment. This requires awareness of the 'factors' responsible for the vulnerable status of women. This perspective seeks to organize women into collective groups, which can identify the sources of women's vulnerability and remove them. Women must identify those prevailing gender differences and inequalities that are the result of structural and institutional differences. They will also identify the prevailing gender relationship and how it undermines the dignity of women. Through socialization, gender planning, and responsibilities about rights, changes in self-identity and beliefs can increase awareness and through that awareness, empowerment can occur.

(e) Organizational approach: Empowerment through organization is a very recent and popular approach. This approach places basic needs for survival as the primary issue of development. At the same time, this perspective places greater emphasis on mobilizing women to identify and challenge both gender and class discrimination. dealing with social problems; Financial assistance and skill-building training; Countering patriarchal

stereotypes against women; acquiring information and knowledge; and participating in the decision-making process, etc. is given special importance by this approach.

Apart from all these viewpoints, many also talk about political approach. This perspective speaks to the creation of an environment that will increase women's political participation. It is very important to develop a politics free from violence, characterlessness, and immorality. Access to information, data, training, family support, etc. is very important for the active participation of women in politics.

All the mentioned approaches are interrelated. Any single approach cannot play the role of empowering women or even if it could it would not be enough. Therefore, the efforts to empower women must be undertaken based on coordination between all approaches.

Indicators of women's empowerment: If we say that a woman is empowered, how do we measure her or how do we identify that woman as an empowered person? Actually, Empowerment cannot be measured but, can be identified by several indicators. That's why we take the help of so many indicators to know whether a woman's empowerment has happened or not. Following H.M. Hemlata several indicators of women's empowerment can be stated. They are of two types, qualitative indicators and quantitative indicators.

Qualitative indicators:

- Self-Confidence- A self-confident woman will know what she wants. Can try to reveal him and get him. He will feel proud of himself, he will have a positive self-image.
- awareness of health, nutrition, legal rights, political activism, government policies and programs;
- Less workload and ample leisure time;
- expanding roles and responsibilities within the family;
- removal of domestic violence;
- Changed mentality towards traditions and customs like child marriage or money system,
- Physical mobility: moving freely between villages, going to town, going to the bank, or post office, going to the market for shopping, going to the cinema, going to an exhibition, going to relatives' houses, etc.
- Be a member of a women's group, women's organization, or any humanitarian organization;
- positive self-identity;
- Having decision-making power within the family regarding the number of children, family income and expenditure, shopping, buying and selling of family assets, etc.;
- A changing mindset towards women's participation in politics, and their interest and willingness to participate in politics;
- control over personal and family income;
- Control over wealth such as land, houses, ornaments, etc.;

- Access to and possession of information, knowledge, and skills.

Quantitative indicators:

- giving or getting married at an appropriate time to raise the age of marriage;
- A contraction in the birth rate or a contraction in the number of children;
- Benefiting from development programs;
- Noticeable positive changes in physical condition / nutritional status;
- improving literacy rates;
- Membership of local self-governing governments, and political parties.

Almost every country, no matter how progressive they are, has a history of ill-treating women. In other words, women worldwide have been rebellious in reaching the status they have today. While Western countries are still making progress, third-world countries like India still lag in Women's Empowerment. Contemporary societies worldwide are exposed to major transformation processes on the fronts of social and economic development. However, these processes were not implemented in a balanced way and increased gender imbalances around the world where women are the ultimate victims. The situation has adversely affected the momentum of women's empowerment. Therefore, we need a completely transformed society where women can be given equal opportunities to grow appropriately.

References:

- 1) Batliwala Srilata, *The Meaning of Women's Empowrment*, Women's World, delhi,1995,
- 2) Mclean Iain, *Oxford Consise Dictionary of Politics*. Oxford University Press, New York, 1996,
- 3) Parenti M. in Martha Chen's Eds, *Women and Empowerment*, Discovery Publishing House, New Delhi,1998,
- 4) Chen Martha, Eds, *Women and Empowerment*, Discovery Publishing House, New Delhi,1998
- 5) www.ijcrt.org © 2018 IJCRT | Volume 6, Issue 2 April 2018 | ISSN: 2320-2882,16.11.2024
- 6) Ravi R Venkat, Reddy V. Narayana, Venkatramana M., Eds, *Empowerment of People: Grassroots Strategies and Issues*, Kaniska Publishers, New Delhi,2002 (in introduction
- 7) Hake Holly M. in Eds, Ravi R Venkat, Reddy V. Narayana, Venkatramana M. *Empowerment of People: Grassroots Strategies and Issues*, Kaniska Publishers, New Delhi,2002
- 8) Hemlata H.M. *Empowerment of Women: A perspective* in Eds, Ravi R Venkat, Reddy V. Narayana, Venkatramana M. *Empowerment of People: Grassroots Strategies and Issues*, Kaniska Publishers, New Delhi,2002,
- 9) Bhasin Kamla, in Eds, Chen, Martha, *Women and Empowerment* Discovery Publishing House, New Delhi, 1998.
- 10) Dassgupta Sukti, *Women Organising for Socio-economic Security*, The Indian Journal of Labour Economics, Vol. 46, No.1,2003,