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Empowerment of Women: A Concept

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Abstract:

The concept of empowerment of women has gained considerable cognisance post the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. However, it remains elusive as a theoretical construct. Most written accounts spell out its practical context. Consequently, the feminist conceptualisations of empowerment emerge as significant. These focus on empowerment in terms of two broad perspectives -development and movement. The notion of empowerment in the feminist conceptualisations is synonymous with the idea of challenging the systemic forces that make women subordinate and powerless. It is thus viewed by them as an enabling process whereby women gain power to resist and question their subordination. However, Mohanty's account offers a contrary perspective on empowerment bringing to fore it as a disabling concept-a heuristic device used by development practitioners to show them as a part of the grassroots struggle.

Keywords: patriarchy, conscientization, practical gender interests, strategic gender interests, power, agency

1. Introduction

Since the last two decades or so, the concept of women's empowerment has gained a considerable deal of cognisance with people in diverse spheres and sectors, namely government departments, non-government organisations (NGOs), bi-lateral or multi-lateral donor agencies, academia and feminist activist groups. The empowerment of women seems to have emerged as the "mantra" of the time, a magical notion, providing a solution or means to resolve all forms of injustice, exploitation, and oppression faced by women, which are a result of unequal and hierarchical social relations.

However, the idea of women's empowerment is not of recent origin.¹ Its origins can be traced back to the evolution of women's movements and their efforts to counter gender inequality since the late 60s. Gender inequality is seen as rooted in the system of patriarchy, whereby the powerlessness (subordination) of women and dominance of men is embedded within social structures and institutions which are sustained and strengthened by value systems and cultural rules which propagate women's inferiority (Lee 2000; Wilson 2000). Patriarchy makes women powerless in many ways — by convincing them of their inferiority to men; by demanding that they conform to certain stereotyped "appropriate" roles and behaviour, by denying them control over their own bodies, lives and labour, by limiting their access and control over resources, and by restricting their opportunities to participate in decisions which affect their own life. Thus patriarchy is that insidious and systemic force that results in the exclusion or marginalisation of women in social, economic, and political spheres of life, thereby affecting their well being. The ramifications of patriarchal biases and subsequent gender discrimination are further vividly experienced, whereby patriarchal norms come to be intersected with other institutionalised forms of inequality, namely race, class, caste, religion etc. This heightens the disadvantage and vulnerability of women leading to their disempowerment and powerlessness.

One of the major issues that women's movements have been struggling with has been the effect of that "self-negation which powerlessness carries with it" (Yuval-Davis 1993:1). The internalisation by the powerless of hegemonic value systems has been seen as a major obstacle to their ability to resist their discrimination and oppression. It is in this context that women's movements have emphasised the significance of the empowerment of women. Empowerment in thus being placed by some in the women's movements as an answer to the question of women's oppression and subordination came to be particularly influenced by Paulo Friere's elaboration of the concept of "conscientization". The notion of "conscientization" was put forth by Friere as a process by which the poor can challenge the structures of power and take control of their lives. This conceptualisation however, ignored gender as a determinant of power. Thus by expanding Frierean analysis and giving gender an integral place, many feminists put forward the concept of women's empowerment in terms of the "conscientization" process, what they referred to as consciousness-raising, involving changes in thinking, ideology, self-image etc.

¹ For a detailed account on the origin of the idea of women's empowerment see Charlotte Bunch and Samantha Frost's "Empowerment" in Routledge International Encyclopaedia of Women: Global Women's Issues and Knowledge; 2 (2000), Jane Stein's Empowerment and Women's Health: Theory, Method and Practice (1997), Nira Yuval-Davis's, Women, Ethnicity and Empowerment (1993).

Despite its early origins in women's movements in the 60s, the term empowerment gained a greater acceptance since the early 80s, when it became a part of development discourse, and particularly since its introduction into international policy programmes at the United Nations Fourth International World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, which asserted that its objective was to integrate women's development with empowerment. In the Indian context, the increasing popularity of the idea of empowerment of women following the Fourth World Conference on Women can be observed in clear terms in the Ninth Five Year Plan (1997-2000) whereby the Indian state recommended an expeditious adoption of the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women. This policy came into effect in the year 2001. It was visualised as a holistic approach to various facets of women's issues and problems and was meant to provide a directional thrust for the country as a whole to advance the status of women. It talked about a synergy of development measures and affirmative action designed for the "holistic empowerment of women" (Sharma 2004). However, it did not explain how this synergy was to be created and what constitutes holistic empowerment (*ibid.*).

The above explicates the growing practical significance of the concept of women's empowerment in general and in India in particular. This has been accompanied with a burgeoning of a distinctive body of literature devoted to the empowerment of women. However, much of this literature does not explicitly spell out what is implied by the term empowerment and simply assumes a theoretical context. By and large, accounts on empowerment in general and empowerment of women in particular, highlight the term empowerment as a practical reality in terms of operationalisation of some development programmes or movement *per se*.² It is therefore not the notion of empowerment but more a descriptive account of a particular developmental programme or movement that is depicted as a strategy for empowerment. Consequently, it can be stated that empowerment has remained an "elusive-concept", with much discussion on it being "context driven", rather than being "theory-driven" (Beteille 1999; Maneja 2002). Nonetheless, the attempts made by feminist scholars to capture the concept of empowerment cannot be denied. In this context the paper first analyses the concept of empowerment as has been elaborated by some feminist scholars. This section focuses on empowerment in relation to the idea of development of women. The paper next elaborates on empowerment as a movement concept. In doing so it brings to fore similarities and contradictions in conceptualisation of empowerment as a development and movement concept. The paper concludes taking a note of central themes underlying the notion of empowerment from development and movement perspectives.

2. Empowerment: A Feminist Perspective

2.1. Development Approach

The concept of empowerment of women has emerged as a counter to women's oppression and subordination in feminist writings. The Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), a southern women's network comprising of activists, researchers, and policy-makers set up prior to the 1985 World Conference on Women in Nairobi, providing a succinct articulation of the significance of the concept of empowerment of women represents a case in point.³

The DAWN group acknowledged the significance of the concept of women's empowerment, while focusing on an alternative vision for a future society:

- "We want a world where inequality based on class, gender and race is absent from every country and from relationships among countries. We want a world where basic needs become basic rights and where poverty and all forms of violence are eliminated. Each person will have opportunity to develop her or his full potential and creativity, and women's value of nurturance and solidarity will characterise human relationships. In such a world women's reproductive role will be redefined: childcare will be shared by men, women, and society as a whole. Only by sharpening the links between equality, development and peace can we show that the basic rights of the poor and transformation of institutions that subordinate women are inextricably linked. They can be achieved together through the self-empowerment of women" (Sen and Grown 1988: 80-82).

The above indicates that, for DAWN, empowerment of women emerged as a strategy for actualising their vision of an alternative society. In other words, the DAWN's quest for empowerment of women was closely linked to the idea that women's empowerment would lead to an alternative society. Its vision of an alternative society is consistent with its idea of long-term and short-term strategies for change in so far as both can be actualised only through the empowerment of women. It defined the long-term strategies for change

² See for instance Anne Marie Goetz and Rina Sen Gupta's *Who Takes the Credit? Gender, Power and Control Over Loan use in Rural Bangladesh in World Development* (1996), Juliet Hunt and Nalini Kasynathan's *Pathways to Empowerment? Reflections on Microfinance and Transformation in Gender Relations in Gender and Development* (2001), Leslie J. Calman's *Towards Empowerment: Women and Movement Politics in India* (1993), Marilyn Carr, Martha Chen and Renana Jhabvala's *Speaking Out: Women's Economic Empowerment in South Asia* (1996), Vina Mazumdar's *Peasant Women Organise for Empowerment: The Bankura Experiment* (1987).

³ Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), grew from small seeds planted in Bangalore, India in August 1984 (Sen and Grown 1988: 9). In 1985, the collaborating institutions included the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD), Women and Development Unit of the University of West Indies (WAND), Christian Michelsen Institute (CMI), Pacific and Asian Women's Forum (PAWF) and Asian Women's Research and Action Network (AWRAN). Funding and support to the DAWN activities was provided by the Ford Foundation, Norwegian Agency for International Development (NORAD), Swedish Agency for Research Cooperation (SAREC), and Finnish International Development Agency (FINIDA). Research organisations and funding agencies such as these have played a critical role in popularising and advocating the notion of empowerment of women.

as those that aimed at challenging the structures of inequality, for instance those based on gender, class, race, ethnicity etc., which act as barriers to development processes responsive to the needs of people. The short-term strategies are those that are related to ameliorative approaches and respond to current and immediate situations of crises, like measures to assist women in food production through promotion of diversified agricultural base, as well as in the formal and informal sectors; while simultaneously building towards the fulfilment of long-term visions. For making the long-term and short-term changes as concrete social reality, DAWN introduced the notion of self-empowerment as an alternative approach to women's development — a strategy from below, which is distanced from and criticises those women's development approaches which aimed at bringing about women's "integration in development" as well as equality oriented feminism.

In the DAWN context the key mechanism in the process of generating power to challenge women's oppression is self-empowerment by means of organisation. Empowerment according to it is not an approach that aims to advance women in the classical sense, but rather a process of self-empowerment and "taking-power" linked with the notion of women's agency for which impetus and support will be provided from outside. Collective strength is the precondition for enabling the co-ordinates of power in gender relations as well as societal and international relations to be shifted. In consistency with this, the DAWN group recognised the significance of women's groups and organisations in the building of women's collective power from below, paving the way to their self-empowerment through the methods delineated in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The DAWN group therefore identified the process of consciousness-raising and popular education as core activities taken up by women's groups and organisations for empowerment of women.

In a vein similar to the DAWN's usage of the term empowerment, Caroline Moser (1989), in her categorisation of the spectrum of development interventions for women, namely the welfare, anti-poverty, equity, and efficiency approaches, identified empowerment as one of the approaches (strategy/means) to gender planning and development. Moser stated that whereas the welfare, anti-poverty, equity, and efficiency approaches are connected with the Women in Development (WID) perspective for gender planning and development, the concept of empowerment, which she classified as the fifth approach, was a Gender and Development (GAD) strategy. This aims to increase the power of women while going beyond the model represented by the WID perspective. Contrary to the approaches falling under the WID perspective which emphasised on top-bottom policy interventions for women's development, the empowerment approach for gender planning according to Moser, provided a firm basis to address women's strategic gender interests, in terms of the triple role of women (production, reproduction, and community management), indirectly through bottom-up or actor oriented mobilisation by organising women around practical gender needs as a means to confront women's oppression. The concepts of practical gender interests and strategic gender interests were introduced by Maxine Molyneux (1985) in her discussion on women's interests in a socialist state. Borrowing from Molyneux, Moser further elaborated on these to analyse the issue of gender planning and development interventions for women. Practical gender interests (needs) are those, which are a response to an immediate perceived necessity of women within a specific context. These are short-term interests and address "conditions" or the material state in which women live and focus on women's basic-needs. Strategic gender interests (needs) are those involving claims to transform social relations and structures of subordination. Unlike the practical gender interests that are in compliance with the existing gender order, strategic gender interests focus on long-term interests of women and stress on improving their "position" vis-à-vis men; these explicitly question the unequal existing order and indicate women's emancipation as their fundamental goal. For such reasons the strategic gender interests (needs) have been frequently identified by feminists as women's "real" interests. An effective realisation of the strategic gender interests (needs) requires not merely that women develop a level of consciousness, but they also find these as acceptable and have a desire for their realisation. The non-acceptability of the policy interventions focusing on strategic gender interests (needs) by most women, is not simply because of false-consciousness as is generally assumed, but also because these focus on making strategic changes in a piece-meal fashion which can threaten their short-term practical interests or entail a cost which cannot be compensated in some way. Thus a formulation of an effective project for women's emancipation requires that a full account be also taken of women's practical interests, while focusing on issues that are strategic in nature. This indicates that the two categories of interests cannot be treated as dichotomous. This is also in consistency with the idea that, it is the politicisation of practical interests and their transformation into strategic interests that women can identify with and support, which constitutes one of the central aspects of the feminists' political practice.

The prospect of structural transformation is inherent in Moser's conceptualisation of empowerment. However, she argued that while the fundamental assumption underlying the empowerment approach is to increase women's power, it does not entail the idea that to increase women's power men will have to be disempowered. Moser's understanding of empowerment thus is based on the denial of the idea that empowerment of some will lead to disempowerment of others. In conjunction with this it can be stated that in Moser's conception, the notion of empowerment is visualised as an idea antithetical to those, which view power as an instrument of coercion, oppression or domination. Rather according to Moser the notion of empowerment rests on the idea of understanding power as a positive and generative concept, synonymous with the idea of enhancing "inner-strengths" and "self-reliance" of women, enabling them to make choices that influence their life by exercising control over material and non-material resources. The idea of consciousness-raising or awareness-generation — enhancing women's ability to exercise agency thus emerges as central to Moser's understanding of empowerment of women.

In brief it can be stated that Moser's conception of empowerment as an approach to gender planning and development is distinct from those falling under the WID perspective. This distinction is made on the basis of the former's rejection of top-down strategies, recognition of women in the triple role, inclusion of the idea of consciousness-raising, and stressing on the significance of strengthening women's organisational potential — collective power.

Similar to the DAWN group, Moser observed the significance of women's groups as crucial for operationalising the empowerment approach for development of women. However, according to her the potentially threatening nature of empowerment approach by the virtue of it focusing on power relations, bottom-up mobilisation, non-hierarchical bureaucratic organisational structures does not make it a very attractive strategy for development to be adopted by the governmental organisations and agencies.⁴ According to her this explains the reason for many groups and organisations in the third world whose approach to women is essentially of empowerment, for remaining underfunded; or else dependent on resources of few international NGOs and first world governments that are prepared to support this approach for women's development.

Srilatha Batliwala (1993) has provided a South Asian framework to the notion of women's empowerment.⁵ Batliwala's description broadly identified empowerment as a process that challenges the subordination of women by changing the "balance of power". Unlike Moser, Batliwala recognised that the empowerment of women will to an extent lead to the disempowerment of men, as for women to be empowered men will have to give up many of their traditional rights and privileges. For the empowerment of women there will have to be a change in the gender based division of labour. This indicates that the idea of conflict of interests is inherent in Batliwala's conceptualisation of empowerment. Nonetheless, for Batliwala, too, like the DAWN group and Moser, the idea of women's empowerment does not imply making women dominant. Rather it entails the idea of women's emancipation and the establishing of a gender just society.

Viewing power as a process and not a product, outlining the goals of empowerment as challenging the subordination and subjugation of women, and transforming the structures and institutions, which support inequality, Batliwala observed re-distribution of power as central to women's empowerment. Batliwala defined power not merely in terms of control over resources but also control over ideology.⁶ She pointed out that it is patriarchal ideology that promotes values of submission, sacrifice, obedience, and silent suffering among women leading to their powerlessness. Elaborating this, she argued that it is the complex of ideology (which is patriarchal in nature) that is embedded in the consciousness of women or internalised by them, which explains why even when they are bringing in or holding the bulk of resources, they continue to uphold male power and participate in their own subordination.

Batliwala, consequently stated that the process of gaining control over the self, over ideology and the resources, which determine power, can be termed as empowerment. Like the DAWN perspective, and like Moser, thus Batliwala's understanding of empowerment of women is rooted in the concept of "conscientization" — the idea of consciousness-raising, that will lead to the development of women's "inner-strengths" making her aware of existing power relations and structures that subordinate her and subsequently enable her to challenge these. She stated that empowerment is to be understood not merely as a change in "mind-set" but according to her it is a process that is to be observed in terms of women's ability to assert their rights, to control resources, and participate equally in decision-making — the ability to exercise an "informed choice". However, though for Batliwala the process of empowerment begins in the mind of an individual with the glimmers of a new consciousness, which questions the existing power relations and roles, she stated that change in an individual may not always lead to her empowerment. Batliwala, therefore, suggested that empowerment to a large extent can be located in terms of change occurring at the collective level rather than it being a process operating at the level of an individual.

Further, Batliwala commented that since the ideology of gender subordination is inculcated from birth, women's empowerment can only be an externally induced process. She therefore focused on the empowerment of women through development planning and policy interventions. She stressed the efficaciousness of development programmes⁷ based on bottom-up mobilisation, in addressing diverse gender interests and challenging the powerlessness of women. In this connection like Moser, Batliwala relied on Molyneux's conceptualisation of women's interests as practical and strategic gender interests. Thus, similar to Moser's understanding, Batliwala also recognised the significance of developmental interventions that address long-term strategic interests in empowering women. The redressal of strategic gender interests, which have a potential to challenge and transform the existing structures of power, according to both Moser and Batliwala, would lead to a change in the position of women vis-à-vis men, and consequently their empowerment. Further, Batliwala like Moser argued that while practical interests can act as a necessary adjunct for advancement of women, they cannot be an end in themselves. Thus, starting from focusing on issues that are of practical interests the developmental interventions claiming to empower women, according to Batliwala, should focus on mobilising them around issues of long-term strategic interests.

⁴ Moser's statement appears to be challenged as in the late eighties and towards the early nineties, particularly since the Beijing Conference, the concept of empowerment has been consciously adopted by various governments including the Indian government as a planned strategy to bring about change. However, then it needs to be seen that the essence of empowerment is not diluted or distorted in state initiated development programmes and practices. For in addition to the bureaucratic and administrative constraints that the state initiated development practices may suffer from, the state is itself is constituted of personnels who are not interest free and may have their biases.

⁵ Batliwala's framework represents the understanding of the concept of empowerment derived from discussions that took place in the South Asian workshop on "Education for Women's Empowerment" organised by Freedom from Hunger Campaign — Action for Development (FFHC/AD) in collaboration with the Asian and South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education (ASPBE) held in 1993, and attended by participants from diverse sectors like NGOs, women's organisations, academic institutions, and government departments.

⁶ Batliwala stated that the resources over which control can be exercised fall into five broad categories: physical resources (like land, water, forests); human resources (people, their bodies, their labour and skills); intellectual resources (knowledge, information, ideas); financial resources (money) and self (that unique combination of intelligence, creativity, self-esteem and confidence).

⁷ Batliwala stated that development programmes for empowering women can be organised by agents from diverse fields — state, women's organisations, NGOs etc.

Naila Kabeer (1994), akin to the previous feminist writers viewed empowerment as an alternative way for bringing about development of women, a concept emerging from grassroots experiences, as a bottom-up approach for women's development. Kabeer analysed the concept of empowerment in terms of programmatic interventions and strategies for women's development. In this context she derived her understanding of the concept of empowerment as an alternative developmental paradigm, by undertaking a deconstruction of the various notions of power, unfolding the potential of empowerment as a transformatory process. Consequently, she demonstrated that the development organisations focus on varied strategies for empowerment of women, based on different notions of power namely "the power within", "the power with" and "the power to"⁸

Kabeer argued that empowerment strategies for women that rest on the notion of "the power within" or "the power from within" entail the idea of developing the ability of women to reflect, analyse and assess what has hitherto been taken for granted so as to enable them to uncover the socially constructed and shared basis of apparently individual problems. These strategies, she pointed, lead to an emergence of a new form of consciousness — a critical awareness. Further she stated that critical awareness arises as a result of women's newly acquired access to the intangible resources of analytical skills, social networks, organisational strength, solidarity and a sense of not being alone. All of this according to her forms a necessary adjunct to improving women's ability to make choices, take decisions or exercise control over resources which had formerly been denied to them.

Identifying the concept of "the power with" with the idea of collective identity or group power, Kabeer recognised a two-fold significance for the adoption of the notion of "the power with" as one of the empowerment strategies. First, it relates to the idea that gender subordination has an ideological basis. The social basis of male domination is concealed through powerful ideological mechanisms, including the "naturalization" of the status quo, so that women experience subordination as inevitable and interpersonal. Recognition of the shared aspect of subordination throws light on its collectively enforced, and hence collectively changeable character and forms the basis of strategies for change. Second, given women's disenfranchisement from most sources of institutional power, their collective strength can be seen as the most important transformatory resource at their disposal that can enable them to resist their oppression more readily. To this extent the organisational capacity of women — "the power with" — emerges as an important resource enabling them to articulate their gender interests.

Kabeer identified the notion of "the power to" as the ultimate goal of the empowerment process. This, she argued, has been recognised as significant by those developmental organisations that aim to enhance the ability of disempowered women to act collectively in their own practical and strategic gender interests. In this context, she highlighted that the notion of empowerment entails the idea of women mobilising around self-defined concerns and priorities.

Building on the various notions of power, Kabeer concluded that empowerment is the ability of women to exercise an "informed choice". Subsequently, she stated, that it underpins the idea of women articulating their gender interests (strategic ones), which had been denied to them by challenging the structures of gender subordination. However, Kabeer pointed out that although the idea of empowerment of women relates to their ability to articulate their gender interests that are strategic in nature, practical gender interests should not be devalued. Thus similar to Moser and Batliwala, drawing from Molyneux's conceptualisation of gender interests, Kabeer acknowledged the linkages between practical and strategic gender interests. In consistency with this she stated that strategies focusing on the realisation of strategic gender interests can be effective only when they take into consideration the trade-offs that women may have to cope with so far as their short-term practical interests are concerned.

In a much later work, Kabeer (1999) while conceptualising women's empowerment as a measurement concept, once again argued that empowerment is tied up with the ability of women to make strategic life choices.⁹ Kabeer, while identifying structural basis to women's disempowerment, attempted to measure the concept of women's empowerment in terms of her ability to exercise choice or agency. She stated that women exhibit varied agency: it can be effective and transformative or both. In most societies, there is a hierarchy of decision-making responsibilities that is socially accepted by the family and community, whereby certain areas are reserved for women in their capacity as mothers, wives, and daughters and so on. Effective agency is the kind that women exercise within these socially accepted domains. The term "effective" here is taken to mean that it operates within existing socio-cultural boundaries. In essence, it adheres to what is already in effect. On the other hand, transformatory agency pertains to possibilities and effects of individual or collective to change wider, structural inequalities and most often, it reflects a desire to bring about a change in social roles and relationships that occur in these domains. Consequently, Kabeer argued that it is women's ability to exercise transformative agency, entailing the idea of challenging and destabilising social inequalities, which is compatible with the notion of empowerment, rather than their ability to exercise effective agency, which essentially expresses and reproduces inequalities. Hence, Kabeer stressed the efficaciousness of those developmental interventions that enhance women's ability to exercise transformative agency as having an empowering potential. However, this is not to imply that Kabeer underplays the relevance of those development interventions, which enable women to exercise effective agency. She indicates that development interventions that enable women to

⁸ Rowlands (1998) like Naila Kabeer explains the notion of empowerment in terms of "the power within", "the power with", and "the power to". The feminist writers drawing from Nancy Hartsock's understanding of power use the terms "the power within", "the power with", and "the power to" (Rowlands 1998; Troutner and Smith 2004). Hartsock basing her views on writers like Hannah Arendt, Mary Parker Follet, Dorothy Emmett, Hannah Pitkin, and Berenice Carroll, contrasts the obedience definition of power from what she calls an 'energy' definition of power (Rowlands 1998: 13). This is power, which does not involve the domination of 'power over', but is a power, which is generative, for example, 'the power some people have of stimulating activity in others and raising their morale' (Ibid).

⁹ According to Kabeer, the idea that the ability of women to make choice or exercise agency is a central basis to analyse how power dynamics operate, leading to their empowerment or disempowerment, gets reaffirmed here.

exercise effective agency should be viewed as ongoing processes of change, which can pave the way for women to exert transformatory agency.

2.2. Movement Approach

Contrary to the above discussed feminists' views on empowerment, Manoranjan Mohanty (1995) conceptualised empowerment in terms of people's struggle and grassroots movements and saw the coupling of the concept of empowerment with development as a patronising idea. Consequently, he argued that the concept of empowerment within the developmental context implies more formal rather than substantive power, as it involves an external upper level agency granting power, rather than people from below seizing power in the course of the struggle. This suggests that for Mohanty empowerment in terms of development planning is far from being free or devoid of hierarchical implications, with the development practitioners predefining the limits around which the struggle of the oppressed is to be organised, making empowerment synonymous with the idea of top-down developmental intervention.

Mohanty further stated that empowerment is simply a term of noble intent adopted by development practitioners to portray their affinity with the idea of grassroots struggles and social transformation, but in practice it is a term with little political value for the oppressed. This indicates that according to Mohanty, the concept of empowerment as it emerges as a part of development discourse appears to be a disabling concept, channelising and restraining the politics of the oppressed — a basis to circumscribe the struggle of the oppressed within specific forms of political bargaining. Mohanty's criticism was fundamentally directed towards the idea that the oppressed can be empowered through state programmes and policy initiatives. He argued that these fail to challenge the structural constraints that hinder the capacity of the oppressed from raising issues that are of strategic interest to them. Consequently, he viewed empowerment in terms of development planning as subversive of the transformatory potential of the movements of protests and resistance organised by the oppressed, which challenge the dominant power structures in society.

Leslie Calman (1992), like Mohanty, conceptualised empowerment as a movement concept. However, she takes a different position in relation to women's movements. She argued that it is possible to differentiate between the two essential organisational and ideological clusters within the women's movement: one which is largely urban-based, focuses on issues of rights and equality, and the other, with both rural and urban components, emphasises empowerment and liberation.¹⁰ She called the groups within the women's movement which focus on women's issues as issues of human rights the rights wing of the movement. They resist the oppression of women by pressurising the state to pass and administer laws providing women access to health, education, and employment etc. She delineates and names another wing of the movement, as the empowerment wing. The latter sees women's concerns as issues of economic and social rights — the right to a livelihood, right to landownership, and the right to determine one's own future; and aims at the personal and community empowerment of poor women. Calman thus observed that the women's organisations which seek to empower women focus on socio-economic development of women and make "conscientization" central to their organising, believing that collective reflection is the first step to their empowerment.¹¹ These, she further stated, accept resources [funds] both from international donors and the Indian government to assist them in organisation and implementation of schemes and undertake development programmes for poor women for empowering them.

Calman's concept of empowerment is in agreement with the earlier discussed feminist scholars' conceptualisations of empowerment as a movement concept revolving around the idea of development programmes. Thus Calman's conceptualisation of empowerment is in conflict with Mohanty's views on the same. According to Mohanty tying empowerment to development programmes would leave the arena of resistance in terms of the oppressed group demanding rights and raising issues focusing on their strategic interests undiscussed. However, this also brings to fore certain problematic aspects in Mohanty's analysis of empowerment as a movement concept. First, Mohanty's complete devaluation or negation of the concept of empowerment when coupled with development planning can be questioned in the wake of the various views discussed above. They have spelt out empowerment in the context of development as an enabling process that focuses on women's practical interests as a step towards their emancipation. Thus it can be argued, that much of Mohanty's criticism of the idea of introducing empowerment through development planning is based on a delinking of issues

¹⁰ Calman has classified organisations like the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), All India Coordinating Committee of Working Women (AICCCWW), All India Women's Conference (AIWC), National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW), Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS), and Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) as a part of the rights wing of the women's movement. While she looked upon organisations like the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), Working Women's Forum (WWF), and Comprehensive Rural Operations Service Society (CROSS) as a part of the empowerment wing.

¹¹ Calman's conceptualisation of the women's movement comprising of two dichotomous clusters seems to be questionable. Calman is making a dichotomy within the women's movement, which can be seen as resting on delinking issues, and concerns, which are inseparably tied. Kumud Sharma (1992) states that such a dichotomy is superfluous and factually incorrect, as according to her there seems to be a general agreement that the ultimate objective of all organisational efforts is women's empowerment, although with a different emphasis on instrumentalities, processes, and priorities. Further, Calman's argument that the rights wing is urban-based and only concerned with bringing about legislative reforms and is disassociated from grassroots mobilisation and the task of empowerment through forging development at the grassroots seems to be factually incorrect. In her study of women's organisations, Patricia Loveridge (1992) pointed out that the AIDWA is a "pan-Indian" organisation addressing women's issues both in rural and urban areas. The validity of Calman's understanding of the women's movement comprising of two dichotomous clusters is an issue that will be further examined in chapter four.

of practical and strategic interest to the oppressed (women). In his elaboration of the concept of empowerment there is no focus on one of the aspects that is crucial to the above examined feminists' notion of empowerment: that the realisation by women of the issues that are of practical interests to them can create a possibility for them to mobilise around issues that are of strategic interest to them. Second, Mohanty's conceptualisation of empowerment as a movement concept cannot be regarded as different from Calman's understanding of empowerment as a movement oriented concept. From examining Calman and Mohanty's views on empowerment as a movement concept, it emerges that similar to movements of protest and resistance, the ultimate goal of movements revolving around the idea of development planning can be to create grassroots mobilisation among women so that they are able to resist and challenge the structures that subordinate them. This is the view found in the feminist scholars' discussion of empowerment spelt out earlier in the paper, which explicitly indicate that the idea of resistance is possible within development programmes aiming at empowerment of women.

3. Conclusion

Summing up the above elaboration of the feminists' understanding of the concept of empowerment certain broad generalisations can be made. First, an examination of the feminists' conceptualisation of empowerment affirms the idea that power is the central notion from which the understanding of empowerment emerges. It lays down a certain framework of power characterising the concept of women's empowerment. It is a framework establishing subordination of women dwelling in the systems of beliefs and ideas indicating power as a phenomenon based on consensus. In conjunction with this, empowerment has been depicted as a generative concept — countering the effects of ideological subordination in a “conscientization” process implying, women gaining power to challenge and resist subordination. Further, empowerment in these writings is depicted as a positive process finding roots in perspectives, which signify the predominance of collective action over individual efforts to challenge structures of subordination and disempowerment. The exception is in Mohanty's analysis of the discourse and practice of empowerment. He views it as a disabling notion — a heuristic device used by the development practitioners to signify themselves as a part of the grassroots struggles.

Second, the above accounts portrayed empowerment as an alternative development paradigm which is being operationalised by people coming from diverse fora — the government organisations, NGOs, women's organisations and international funding agencies. They argue the relevance of certain development programmes and policy interventions to empower women. This is based on the presumption that the idea of reformulation of power-relations is central to the programmes and policies aiming at empowerment of women. To put it otherwise feminist writings have suggested the efficaciousness of those development interventions with respect to empowerment of women that will lead to a realisation of their strategic gender interests. However, while highlighting the development interventions that focus on strategic gender interests leading to empowerment of women, in their view strategic gender interests are not divorced from practical gender interests. Rather, the effectiveness of women's empowerment through development planning revolves around the extent to which a particular development programme or a strategy, in opening up new avenues to make choices concerning their everyday reality and practical interests can be a step to bring into effect larger changes that would lead to transformation and the emancipation of women. Thus, the interlinkages between micro and macro level transformation are crucial to the prospect of empowering women. Also, feminist writings suggest that it is not simply the category of interests (needs) — strategic or practical — that are crucial to empowerment, but how such interests come to be identified by women as self-defined priorities and lead them to mobilise for their realisation. Consequently, in feminist writings empowerment is depicted as a bottom-up approach for women's development.

Third, it can be observed that in feminist writings empowerment has been demonstrated as a conscious developmental strategy instituted to bring into effect a planned transformation in the status of women. However, as has been pointed out above, these writings have portrayed empowerment as a strategy that seeks to open up rather than foreclose or define the possibilities available to women to exercise agency. Implicit in this is the idea that the strategies for empowering women or the process of women's empowerment can have both intended and unintended consequences as far as women's ability to make choices or exercise agency is concerned.

Finally, an important issue, that needs to be taken into cognisance though not examined individually in relation to the above examined feminist writings, is that women's oppression is multi-dimensional. This has its origin in the recognition of the idea that gender is not a homogenous category, but cuts across various other institutionalised forms of inequality like caste, class, ethnicity, etc. In this context the feminist writers such as Moser, Batliwala, and Kabeer pointed out that the strategies focusing on empowerment of women can be effective only when they take into consideration the fact that women's oppression and disempowerment emanates not exclusively due to their gender but it is also based on their caste, class, ethnicity etc.

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