

Empowerment and Global Action of Women - Theory and Practice

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0. Introduction

Since the 80s an increased activism by women can be witnessed in „Third World“ countries. The word that has been used to describe this phenomenon is „empowerment“. In many aspects the word that came to be a concept is quite different from other concepts like „participation„ or „gender“. Firstly, the concept emerged from practice to theory. In hegemonic scientific tradition, concepts are being developed at an abstract level and laid down for verification at the practical level or it is being checked if reality fits into the theoretical concepts. Not so with „empowerment“: This is a case where initiatives and processes that were going on at the grass-roots level found their way through to the academia on one hand and development discourse and practice on the other. In the last 15 years, conceptualisations of „empowerment“ are offered not only in development studies, but also in women´s and gender studies, political theory, sociology, psychology, adult education, special education, social work, theology and other related fields. Secondly, the location of the acting subjects that shaped the concept: It was basically social action groups and NGOs in the South that used the term in their political work. Thirdly, as a rare case, a concept that emerged from the discussions of the women´s movement and was initially used as strategic means and then gradually permeated to the „general“ development debate. Lastly, it gives a new dimension to international feminism. While the feminist debates are largely guided by hegemonic feminism of the North, here, women in the South inspired women all over the world to use a concept that can help to change the life of women.

I. The career of a concept

The term „empowerment“ was first used in the context of political mobilisation in the 1960s by activists of the Black Panther Movement in the US. Since then it has entered many fields of theory and practice. Meanwhile, it is well established throughout the development discourse which is evident by the statement of the World Bank (1994):

„Many basic services ... are best managed at the local level - even the village level - with the central agencies providing only technical advice and specialist inputs. The aims should be to empower ordinary people to take charge of their lives, to make communities more responsible for their development, and to make governments listen to their people. Fostering a more pluralistic structure - including non-governmental organisations ... - is a means to these ends“.

One of the major areas where empowerment played a important role is adult education. Access to literacy is considered one of the main factors for empowerment. Literacy became the central focus for several strands of the progressive literacy movement in the

1970s inspired by the radical pedagogical movement of Paulo Freire. Large literacy programmes were designed basing on Freires „conscientisation“ model (Freitag-Rouanet 1999). While the „functional“ school of literacy lays emphasis on the cross-sectoral impacts of literacy the emancipatory view of literacy draws its strength from its potential for initiating structural change. Freire´s concept focusses on individuals becoming „subjects“ in their own lives and developing a „critical consciousness“ - an understanding of their own living conditions and circumstances and the social environment - the result of which is taking action that is structural. This process has been having different names over time, i.e. awareness building, adult literacy, consciousness raising, nonformal education, etc. and has been the basis for popular education programmes in many socialist countries such as Tanzania and Nicaragua, especially in the post-liberation phase. The liberating potential of literacy lies in giving the poor a voice, in gaining self-confidence, in becoming politically conscious and critically aware, and ultimately becoming independant. „Literacy provides access to written knowledge - and knowledge is power. In a nutshell, literacy empowers“ (Kassam 1989).

The notion of empowerment in a public health perspective is less emphatic. Health care can either be empowering if people have greater control over factors that influence their health and their lives as well as a greater leverage over public institutions. But it can also be people-disempowering when it is used by authorities as an instrument of social control. Public health experts demand that the empowerment factor should be the key consideration when evaluating the long term implications of any health care projects. In participatory research in agriculture it has been suggested that legitimising indigenous knowledge can bring empowerment for resource-poor farmers.

Empowerment plays is an important category in the debate on Sustainable Development, too. In the field of „primary environment care“ practitioners have suggested that empowerment refers to securing access to natural resources and sustainable management of these resources. In a more comprehensive way, Singh and Titi (1995) identify following elements or necessary conditions for empowerment:

- local self-reliance, autonomy in the decision-making processes of communities at village level, and direct participatory democracy in the larger process if representative governance.
- Provision of space for cultural assertion and spiritual welfare and experiential social learning
- Access to land and other resources, education for change, and housing and health facilities
- Access to knowledge and skills (both endogeneous and external) for the maintenance of constant natural capital stock and the environmental sink capacity;
- Access to skills training, problem solving techniques, and best available appropriate technologies and information;
- Participation to decision-making processes by all people, in particular women and youth

One of the few attempts to offer an analytical framework comes from Shetty (1991). Based on his review of literature and his off-hand experience in the field Shetty proposes a generalised understanding of empowerment which can be a useful analytical tool. His approach is articulated in eight non-hierarchical heads. It comprises the processual and holistisc character of empowerment and posits it within the local social, cultural, economic, political context which makes it „particularistic“ rather than

„universalistic“. However, irrespective of the context, a generalisation can be made with regard to the stakeholder that are marginalised groups (i.e. urban or rural poor, women, landless, dalits, migrants, AIDs victims, disabled). Borrowing Molyneux's (1981) classification of kinds of interests Shetty ascribes to strategic interests that aim at creating structural changes from below. The psychological level emphasises the individual and collective self-constructions of the marginalised as disempowered. Finally, democratisation and sustainability are also important features of empowerment.

As has been illustrated briefly the term has undergone a long journey. While it was dormant in the 70s the term became quite popular after it was conceptualised by women's organisations in mid 80s. Meanwhile you find the word in most unexpected quarters. Interestingly, Bob Haas, ex-Peace-Corps Volunteer and 95 % owner of Levi Strauss has enshrined „empowerment“ of the employees as a stated long-term objective of the company. The fact that George Bush established the „Empowerment Task Force“ in early 90s is truly a sign of co-optation into official US-Government parlance.

The changes the concept has gone through is indeed a metamorphosis. It has changed from an emancipatory concept to an assimilative one. From a political to an instrumental one. The Human Development Report 1995 (UNDP) indicators for assessing empowerment is indeed a progress, but the fact is: the concept has been ripped of its political content. With the inflationary use it has become a catch-all word, a „plastic word“ readily to be used in all contexts and with no content at all.

II. The critique of a concept

As can be seen there is a wide range of definitions of empowerment and the term means different thing to different people. Being a plastic word gives space to multiple and different interpretations.

Especially feminist critiques are skeptical about the inflationary use. They criticise that most of the approaches to empowerment aim at improving the marginalised within the existing systems. They also criticise that these approaches do not raise the question of power. Their suspicion refers to the fact that the concept gains popularity in the development debate at a time when many Third world countries are going through a severe debt crisis that affects women most.

With regard to UN Population Conference Farida Akhter has pointed out that the term is being used by those who are in fact working for *dismpowerment* of women. At the conference women's empowerment was seen as the means to achieve population control. The population establishment have seen their goal in enforcing and marketing reproductive technologies and products. She has criticised the cooptation of the term as well as the the cooptation of feminists in the name of empowerment. Akhtar illustrates how the UN-Conferences define what is „woman“ or should be and how she needs to be empowered: poor, illiterate, and an object of reproduction technologies.

In the final judgement feminist critiques dismiss the term as it is being incorporated and depoliticised through the inflationary use by different actors. Because of the danger and fact of cooptation and incorporation there has been voices to do away with the term. In my view, not making use of the concept would mean giving up the battle too soon. What

is in need is to assert the right to define the empowerment from women's and gender perspective. Also, it would be essential for the women's movement to insist upon the political content and political power in it.

II. Feminist notions of Empowerment

The feminist notions of empowerment see women as acting agents and not as beneficiaries, clients, participants, etc. and they deal with the question of power. In analysing the literature on empowerment Jo Rowlands has made following classifications of power (1998):

- **power over:** controlling power over some one and something. Response to it can be compliance, resistance or manipulation
- **power to:** generative or productive power that creates new possibilities and actions without domination
- **power with:** power generating a feeling that the whole is greater than the sum of individuals and action as a group is more effective
- **power from within:** a sense that there is strength that is in each and every individual. The recognition of one's own self-acceptance and self-respect enables the acceptance of others as equals

Most of the definitions on empowerment imply the dimension of „power over“, i.e. access to decision-making, etc. In contrast, „power with“ relates to a notion of collective power. Medel-Anonuevo has suggested that many women's NGOs in the South relate to this kind of understanding where changes are brought about by a sense of „together with others“ (Medel-Anonuevo 1996).

Naila Kabeer (1994) subscribes not so much to „power over“ but to „power within“ yourself that needs to be strengthened. She undertakes a deconstruction of the notions of power and unfolds the theoretical and practical potential of empowerment. „Power within“ needs recognition by experience and analysis of the subordination of women. According to Kabeer, such power cannot be given, it has to be self-generated and taken. Empowerment is a process where women are able to change from a state of powerlessness („I cannot“) to a state of collective self-confidence („we can“).

Besides the notion of power any attempt to theorise empowerment would involve in framing the concept in cognitive, psychological, economical and political aspects (Stromquist 1993). The cognitive aspect refers the ability of women to understand the situation of subordination in society at the micro- as well as macro-level and also to take decisions that are against the cultural and social norms. It involves learning other notions of gender relations and the dismissal of beliefs that structure the powerful traditional gender ideologies. Cognitive dimension includes knowing about one's sexuality and demystifying old taboos, knowing one's fundamental rights, unpaid work and also elements that constitute life in marriage, with children and in the household.

The psychological aspect refers to the developing of the feeling that women can make a contribution to improve their situation and that their action will be successful. It includes developing self-esteem. However, self-respect and self-esteem cannot be taught rather

a situation must be created where these can develop. There needs to be space where women can assert themselves.

Though the psychological aspect is important it needs to be strengthened by economical aspects. Reducing economic dependency can be a basis for empowerment. Women need to be engaged in a productive activity that gives them some financial autonomy.

The political aspect involves the capacity to analyse a situation in a political and social context. It includes the ability to organise and mobilise for social change. The process of empowerment covers not only awareness at the individual level but also at the collective level. This results in collective action which again is the precondition for collective change.

Empowerment as a relational category

Processes that were supposedly to bring empowerment have in fact meant disempowerment to women. In historical terms, modernisation processes were also legitimised by arguments of empowerment of women. However, modernisation has resulted in more disempowerment of women in some parts of the Third World (Boserup 1970, Mies/Shiva 1993). The introduction of the cash economy can disempower women (Afshar 1989).

Also, empowerment does not effect everyone in the same way. It is necessary to study empowerment in relation to disempowerment. Empowerment of some can mean disempowerment of others. Nira Yuval Davis has pointed out the problem of conflicting interests that needs to be handled. Hence empowerment must be seen as a relational category.

Individual vs. collective

In the prevailing literature empowerment is located to a large extent at the individual level. The individual notion must be contrasted to the notion of „entrepreneurial self-reliance“ that is prevalent in mainstream development. Developing self-esteem is an important prerequisite. However, in order to enhance changes in women´s power within society the individualistic notion does not suffice. Personal empowerment is one of the factors of a holistic understanding of empowerment. Also, it does not automatically lead to empowerment between relationships. It is the collective ways of learning and collective ways of acting and resisting that brings about change.

Empowerment is achieved if and when women set the agenda, organise mutual self-help in the neighbourhood, group or network, demand accountability by the state and society for change. It is the women´s needs and visions that are at the centre point (Young 1993).

IV. The local and the global

Since the beginning of the 90s with the World Conference on Environment and Development the global perspective has become increasingly important in the political arena. This found its reflection in the slogan „Think globally - act locally“ that initiated processes of environmental protection all over the world, but especially in Northern countries. The accelerating process of globalisation has necessitated local as well as global action. However, how global is „global“ though? And how local is „local“? „Local“ could be associated with things happening in the neighbourhood, municipality community, city or a region. But increasingly groups at the grass-roots level in the South articulate issues that are primarily global. Environmental action or activism in free trade zones are examples of local action with a global perspective.

If local women in India protest against the digging of sand out of the river in their locality by multinational company for export, this action may be considered local. But their action is also global. They resist to liberalisation policies of the Indian government, resist to the increasing power of the multinational organisations in the country.

It can be said of these groups that the moment they organise themselves they are global.

On the other hand, there are groups and governments predominantly in the North (but also in the South) that claim to have a global perspective but actually turn out to be very parochial. The Rio-Conference 1992 was supposed to be on global environment aiming to save the planet and solve problems considered to be a concern of the humankind as a whole. But at the same time the US President Bush insisted that the American lifestyle is not at the disposition. In the name of global thinking and action there was assertion of the resource consuming lifestyle affordable to very few and at the cost of the majority of the people on earth.

Similar interpretations of the „local“ and „global“ can be found even in action of the international women´s movement. At the Cairo-Conference, the major issue of development was sidelined, abortion turned out to be the major issue which led to unholy coalitions of women from the North and the conservative forces. Women from the South raised many issues from development, health, education to human rights. It could be said that the Southern women were more global whereas the Northern women were „monolithising abortion“ (Spivak 1996)

Networking as a strategy for empowerment

Women´s organisations have stressed the importance of global action in the light of globalisation. Keeping in mind that women bear the negative effects of globalisation they make use of the positive aspects of globalisation. They use the infrastructure that is available to organise collective action in order to bring transformation from below. The networks that have emerged are an indication of individual and collective empowerment.

Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN)

On the eve of the 3. UN-World Conference on Women in Nairobi a group of activists, NGO-workers, academics, decision makers came together to discuss the burning issues that affected the majority of women in Third World countries. The outcome was

an appeal for a new development paradigm from a women's perspective. It is based on a profound and thorough analysis of the different forms of oppression between the sexes, person and nature, between the North and the South. In the light of the debt crisis they offered a holistic analysis of world economy and trade, militarisation, ecological exploitation, gender discrimination and postcolonial structures.

DAWN's radical analysis was followed by a radical vision, too. Out of an analysis from the perspective of poor Third World women arose a vision of a society with no oppression at all. They dismiss existing structures and by stating that what they want is not a larger piece of the cake but a totally different cake altogether and call for a new development paradigm that restructures the power relations. They demand a world where bottom-up approaches do justice to women's needs and the former colonised have the chance to autochthonous development.

Major aim of the network is transformation - which can be achieved through empowerment. DAWN's strategical concept of empowerment includes both the individual and collective dimension and participation in processes of decision making, strengthening of women's organisations, acknowledge and value women's work as well as control of the means of production and resources.

A major strategy of empowerment consists of building women's power through organising and networking of movements on the basis of their diverse experiences. Hence, their concept of empowerment respects the diversity of struggles and acknowledges the historical specificity of each and every struggle.

Women Living under Muslim Laws (WLUML)

The network came into being after several incidents had occurred in 1984 that related to Islam, laws and women in general. These incidents manifested, though geographically scattered, a more general problem confronting women in the Muslim world. WLUML extends to women living in countries where Islam is the state religion as well as those from Muslim communities ruled by religious minority laws, to women in secular states, as well as to women in migrant Muslim communities in Europe, the Americas, and Australia. It also includes non-Muslim women who may have Muslim laws applied to them directly or through their children.

Mobilising women against adverse laws is difficult not only because women in the Muslim world perceive themselves as poor and powerless but also because their identity construction is within their own national context. Initiatives against discriminatory laws is facilitated if women can be sure of the support of another collectivity that functions as an alternative reference group that might live in another context but is also affected by Muslim laws.

The „s“ of laws in the name of the network exemplifies the diverse complexity of the problem considering the fact that there exist many significantly different varieties of Muslim societies and these realities have produced many diverse feminist movements. It works against the common presumption that there exists one homogeneous world that it dismisses as a fallacy. Laws formally considered Muslim differ from one cultural context to another. Also, a plurality of legal codes might coexist in a given context.

It aims to create and reinforce linkages between women and women's groups within Muslim communities, to increase their knowledge about both their common and diverse situations, and to strengthen their struggles by creating the means and channels needed to support their efforts internationally from within and outside the Muslim world. In essence the purpose of the network is to increase the autonomy of women affected by Muslim laws by encouraging them to analyze and reformulate the identity imposed on them through the application of Muslim laws, and by doing so, to assume greater control over their lives.

Diverse Women for Diversity (DWD)

DWD takes globalisation as its point of departure, acknowledging that it hits women most. Globalisation also means globalisation of poverty, food insecurity and social disintegration. It connects global processes with everyday lives of women. Major issues are food security, economic security, environment security and peace. Since women as a collective force have been missing in global processes DWD is increasingly engaged in international negotiations on issues like peace making, economic globalisation and trade, biodiversity, biotechnology and international property rights. Their aim is to link up the global level with the local. Indigenous Women (from Asia, Africa and Latin America) as well as professional lobbyists work towards crucial issues that are being decided upon at UN-Conferences on world trade, sustainable agriculture, biotechnology, biodiversity, patenting on life.

The International Network for the Rights of Female Violence Victims in Pakistan (INRFVVP)

INRFVVP was initiated soon after the release of a documentary film in US-TV that dealt with acts of violence against women in Pakistan. The violence ended in life-threatening injuries or even death of these women. It reported on the series of so-called "honour killings" - killing by family members to protect the "honour" of the family. Instead of protecting the women in many cases the state supports the police and the judiciary side that are with the family and the killings often go unpunished.

Though the network was started only in February 1999 within a couple of weeks several committees were set up (research, victim support, education, dissemination, administration, etc.) soon after. It is based in the US but has memberships all over the world. Major focus is lobbying and advocacy at the national, regional and international level. INRFVVP along with other women's organisations pressurise the government of Pakistan to bring changes in the legislation to protect women's rights. However their action is not restricted to Pakistan alone. The communication enables to participate in finding solutions to violence against women in other regions, too.

According to information of international NGOs, in 1998 286 women are known to have been killed in the name of honour in Pakistan. Given these figures Pakistan's failure to pass a resolution constitutes a clear lack of "due diligence" by the state to protect women.

INRFVVP facilitates interaction between women in different parts of the world. Learning about violence against women not only in Pakistan. At the same time the network invites interested women and men to relate to crimes against women in the own context.

V. Conclusion

The networks focus on certain issues, highlight certain aspects. DWD brings women at the local level and women at the global level together. Here you find *campesina* sitting somewhere in Latin America engaged in protecting the biodiversity of the region and actively participating in UN-conferences. Here, the local and the global collapse into one.

In the general discussion on networking it is maintained that common issue is the basic principle of action. WLUML shows that networking can be meaningful on the basis of an abstract commonality which can manifests itself in different ways. Here, acknowledgement of difference is as important as commonality.

The interesting point about INRFVVP is that it largely works in cyberspace. It shows the potentiality of internet. However it must be noted that this is of course restricted to those who have access to internet. It is striking that in the neighbouring country India have more severe forms of violence against women, no such network has emerged yet.

In the course of 15 years of DAWN's proposals the idea of transformation and empowerment has widely influenced the international women's movements. The number of networks has increased in an exponential rate. The NGO-Forum at the 4. UN-Women's Conference in Beijing has set in motion such a diversity of networks with their different issues that it has been called a „process of empowerment“.

These networks offer scope for communication beyond commonalities and differences. They also have in them the potentiality in working towards international civil society without being assimilative and at times being subversive. They may that give space to different kinds of visions and strategies that will emerge over time. And they may even pave the way from romantic sisterhood to strategic sisterhood.

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