Empowerment: Towards the Concept

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ABSTRACT

Empowerment may be considered as a process of ensuring the target group's active and effective participation in all the decision making bodies, awakening them to learn Empowerment may be considered as a process of ensuring the target group's active. to perceive Socio-economic, and political contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements, opines Ds. Vineeta Srivastava, highlighting the need to conceptualize empowerment in the present scenario.

The popularization and globalization of the term empowerment and its frequent use in (various) altogether different fields: in related as well as interrelated areas; in official documents and policy statements of the Government & Non-Government organizations make it extremely important to specifically conceptualize empowerment in the present context. The present paper is a humble effort this direction. The paper has been divided to three sections. Section-I highlights various voews about the empowerment process. On the basis of these views, some salient features have been identified and described in section-II. And section-III is an analysis touching various dimensions of empowerment. Besides analysis, an attempt has also been made to define empowerment.

Section-l

The concept of empowerment appears to be the end result of a number of important and critical discussions, dialogues and debates generated by the women's movements through out the world. The interaction among feminists, the concept of "popular education" with its Freire's theory of 'conscientization', and gramacian thought of participatory mechanism has provided the basis for Developing the concept of 'empowerment'.

Divergent views exist about empowerment. Acosta-Beien and Bose (1990) see empowerment as a battle for power against factors which perpetuate the structural subordination of poor and treat them as "the last colony"- the global capitalist system. cultural praxis, religion, education and other social institutions. Another view is that empowerment is the process of acquiring "real power" over maternal resources and political structures (Shetty:1993). Morgen and Bookmen are of the opinion that "empowerment begins when they (poor) change their ideas about the causes of their powerlessness; recognize the systematic forces that oppress them, and act to change the conditions of their lives" (Shetty:1993).

On the similar lines, empowerment has also been considered as 'a process which makes the poor (i.e. the powerless) to assert his independent right to choose: and to control the concerned resources. (Apte:1995).

Paul (1987) states that empowerment implies 'equitable sharing of power thereby increasing the political awareness and strength of weaker groups and augmenting their influence over "the processes and outcomes of development"(Apte:1995). Empowerment involves an external upper level agency to grant power, rather than people below from seizing it (Mohanty: 1995).

Understanding empowerment requires recognizing the role that power can play in social relationships. Power has the potential to be a positive force that can be generated in the process of social interaction.

Checkoway argues that "Power is a present or potential resource in every person or community... There is always another person or community that can become empowered. However the key is for the people to recognize and act upon the present or potential power that they already have"(Selvam:1995). Thus, both the individual and the community have untapped power which need to be unleashed through the process of empowerment.

Here, it is worthwhile to mention that empowerment process may involve increasing any one or any combination of the three kind of power i.e (i) personal power, (involves experiencing oneself as an effective and capable person), (ii) interpersonal power (i.e. the ability to influence others, may be derived from one's position e.g. as a supervisor, one's role as a parent; one's interpersonal skill e.g. conversational ability etc.) and (iii) political power (i.e. the ability to infuence the allocation of resources through formal or informal means').

Section-il
In the light of above description, following features may be ascribed to the empowerment process:

1. **Unending process**: Empowerment does not refer to an end-of-project product or state that can be attained within defined time frames. Instead it is best understood as a dynamic and on-going process which can be located on a continuum.

2. **Relative concept**: There is no ideal state of empowerment. Empowerment is perceived in relation to some existing/prevailing conditions.

3. **Choice:** Choice is the hallmark of the powerful (Apte. 1995 and shetty, 1994). Empowerment is only complete, when at last, people are left to their own set of choices.

4. **Conscientization**: Conscientization, a process of awakening, refers to learning, to perceive socio-economic and political contradictions and to take action against oppressive elements (Apte. 1995 and shetty, 1994), is a key feature of empowerment.

5. **Democratisation**: Another key feature of the empowerment approach is community participation (as a means and an end) or in a wider sense, democratisation. Clearly no process that hinders full participation of the community at all levels can be empowering

6. **Formal power**: Empowerment implies formal rather than substantive power. It puts excessive emphasis on formal institutional arrangement. (e.g. Women are empowered by the provision of 33 per cent reservation in the panchayats. The SC, ST and OBC are empowered by reservation in legislatures and services.)

7. **An upper level agency to grant power**: Empowerment involves an external upper level agency to grant power besides than people from below seizing it in the course of a struggle.

8. **Redistribution of Power**: The empowerment approach is mainly interested in those which are aimed at attacking the fundamental causes of powerlessness. It implies redistribution of power between the poor and the rich, men and women, caste Hindus and untouchables etc. It is, therefore, inherently a political process. Development projects with empowerment objectives, consciously or otherwise, aspire to create conditions for instrumental structural changes from below to upward.

9. **Holistic approach**: Empowerment refers to an overall approach rather than a set of inputs. A whole range of economic, social and political activities; including group organisation and participation, agriculture and income generation projects, education, awareness and intergrated health care; all work synergistically towards the common aim of empowering the target group.

10. **Context-specific**: Empowerment can be defined only within the local social, cultural, economic, political and historical context. Thus a key feature of any empowerment is that it is "particularistic" rather than "universalistic"

11. **Marginalised groups**: The empowerment approch is clearly focussed on marginalised groups whether they include urban or rural poor, women, the landless. untouchables (in India), ethnic minorities, the disabled, AIDS victims etc

12. **Psychological construct**: It is an agreed upon statement that "psychological element is inherent in the analysis of the concept of empowerment". Especially at the level of the individual, empowerment is very much dependent on the perception that marginalised people have of themselves. But it is equally true at the collective level where empowerment is as much a psychological as a political construct.

13. **Sustainability**: Empowerment approach builds self reliance and ultimately sustainability.

Section-III
Empowerment: An Analysis
The fact that 'empowerment has no universal and unidimensional definition' has been enlightened by the review of relevant literature. Empowerment is considered as a term which is difficult to define (Rahman; 1990 Shelty: 1993) and give rise to alternative explanations since it has components that are political and psychological. Shetty (1993) perceives empowerment like obscenity which is easy to "intuit" but complex to define. While empowerment has appeared to slip easily into the vocabulary of a broad spectrum of development practice, by a wide range of people psychologists, politicians, social workers, political scientists and theologists, its link with 'the taking of action' is not always understood. Oakley (1994; 6)

rightly doubts whether the practice fully understands the implicit meaning of the term (Rahman; 1990 Shelty: 1993). And this is why the allegation that government, states NGO's and others seek refuge behind unclear objectives using vague terms like empowerment and conscientization is least uncommon. The lack of credible monitoring and evaluation methodology for empowerment further leads us to question about the intrinsic value of the concept.

In the light of the above discussion, we may conclude that every project aiming at empowering poor will have to (or should) give an operational definition of 'empowerment keeping in view the target group, socio-cultural, economic and political context, the power distribution system etc. But in general terms empowerment may be considered as a process ensuring the (poor) target group's active and effective participation in all the decision-making bodies, awakening them to learn to perceive socio-economic and political contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements.

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