

Women's Empowerment

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Abstract

This entry discusses women's empowerment, a concept commonly used in academic and non-academic contexts. Four themes are discussed; conceptualising and problematising what is meant by the term women's empowerment, outlining differing components in understanding women's empowerment, reviewing the challenges in measuring women's empowerment and, ongoing debates and issues when discussing women's empowerment.

Main Text

Women's empowerment is a commonly used concept in policy, non-governmental organisations (NGO) and development work, as well as being a term used across sociological, psychological and economic disciplines. Women's empowerment is often referred to as a global issue, one that is recognised in the 17 UN *Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)* adopted by all United Nations Member States as a call for action on poverty alongside economic and environmental sustainability by 2030. In SDG 5 on gender inequality girls and women's empowerment is specifically mentioned with the target by 2030 of achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. This entry explores four relevant themes within the broad umbrella of women's empowerment; conceptualising and problematising what is meant by the term women's empowerment, outlining differing components in understanding women's empowerment, reviewing the challenges in measuring women's empowerment and, finally this entry finishes with summarising ongoing debates and issues that consider the role of agency and collective empowerment.

Conceptualising women's empowerment

Despite being a commonly used concept or term, defining empowerment is far from simple. From a sociological perspective, the concept of women's empowerment sits within the wider feminist discipline that continues to raise awareness about women's position unequal gender relations. From a feminist perspective understanding women's empowerment necessitates an understanding of power more broadly. Batiwala (1994:130) defines empowerment as, 'the process of challenging existing power relations, and of gaining greater control over the sources of power' (Batiwala, 1994: 130). Power is centralised as part of this definition, and others have stressed the need to consider empowerment as an active, multi-dimensional process (Sahay,1998). To be empowered requires a process of change, so that those who previously did not have access to choice, are able to challenge existing power relations and through this have the opportunity to make different choices. This emphasis on choice and access to power is about active change, as empowerment is that it is not something that can be done to people, but to be empowered people need to make sense of their lives, their experiences as well as having the resources to challenge their current position (Kabeer, 2001). To do this requires *critical consciousness*, a term used by Freire to refer to how people

come to understand social, political, and economic oppression and then act. Only through the realisation of how power and oppression operate can people make *sustainable* changes in their own lives, and communities. Despite definitions emphasising different aspects, a common thread in the various definitions of empowerment is recognised by Batiwala (2007) as referring to shifts in economic, social and political power *between* individuals and groups and the interconnections of these.

Components of women's empowerment

The term women's empowerment is not only difficult to define but it is also a broad concept and it is helpful to consider the various components or aspects of women's empowerment. Kabeer (1999) discusses three interrelated dimensions of resources, agency and achievements. Resources refer to material resources, but also human and social resources to consider who has access to resources, but also who distributes these resources in varying contexts (link to power). Agency is about people's capacity to make life choices, as well as having the power to define life choices. Achievements relate to how resources and agency combine so that people have the opportunity and choice to live the life they want (Kabeer, 2001). These resources are interrelated and link to power and choice.

A multi-dimensional perspective on empowerment is proposed by Mandral (2013) who by discusses five components; social, education, economic, political and psychological empowerment, these are discussed briefly in turn. Social empowerment refers to women's social position by challenging issues of discrimination. This is broader than just gender, but also recognises the intersection of discrimination to understand how race, disability, religion intersect to cause multiple forms of discrimination which influence girls and women differently. Educational empowerment refers to girls and women's access to education, education is key to addressing power inequalities in women's lives. Education is not just about girls and women accessing knowledge, it is also related to self-esteem, confidence, as well as increased political and economic awareness which benefit women and their families. For the eradication of women's poverty access to education is a necessity. Economic empowerment is about women having access to income, through employment or welfare that supports women directly. This includes considering employment rights for women, maternity, flexible working, equal pay and equal treatment of women in the workplace. Political empowerment considers the extent to which women are involved in decision-making and have power at various levels of government. While this is an area where women's power has increased, this differs depending on context and women still remain unequal in their influence of political authority. Political power is about the extent to which women's voices are heard in policy making and debates. Finally, psychological empowerment is about women being treated with respect and is linked to women's rights, but also about self-confident and self-esteem. Understanding these components individually but then holistically is needed to see the different elements of women's empowerment.

Measuring women's empowerment

Measuring women's empowerment provides additional conceptual and methodological challenges. In this section, four potential approaches are discussed from the work of Mason (2005). The first is to measure the factors that empower women, for example measure employment rates, or reduction in child marriages. This approach might work because these factors may be easy to measure, but they do not always translate to empowerment. The second approach is to measure the outcomes that empowerment should achieve, for example more girls in school, or reduction in domestic violence. These approaches may give a picture of empowerment, but it may be difficult to ascertain the extent to which women's empowerment or involvement has indeed had impact. A third possible approach is through

observational studies. This approach requires a researcher to spend time in communities and observing how women's position changes. This can be a powerful approach but is limited by the number of those involved in the study. The final approach is through the use of a sample survey. This approach asks people to report on their own feelings of empowerment. This allows for a large sample size and the possibility to group data but may not give information about decision making power and resources accurately or may miss out on more detailed data/experiences. In sum, recognising the challenges to measuring empowerment Mason (2005) suggests a mixed-method approach should be considered in research on empowerment to understand the multidimensional nature of empowerment and the components of empowerment. Thinking about how empowerment is measured has implications for the funding of initiatives that support empowerment. The collection or emphasis on large-scale data or information, should not replace an understanding or support for women's empowerment at a more local community led action.

Ongoing challenges and debates in understanding women's empowerment

In this section, two of the ongoing debates in the field on understanding and measuring girls and women's empowerment are discussed; firstly, the role of values and secondly the relationship between agency and collective empowerment.

Values play a role in understanding what empowerment means and how it can be measured. This is often the case when discussing women and girls in third world contexts where girls and women are often portrayed as disempowered. There can be a desire to 'teach' or 'tell' girls and women what will make them empowered. As a result, these virtuous models can create policies which fail to recognise the context in which girls and women are living.

The relationship between agency and empowerment is also complex as the extent to which individual empowerment (agency) results in wider or broader empowerment for women is not clear. The extent to which individual agency and how it operates in a context where cultural values constrain choice and opportunity should be understood, to see where increased agency provides girls and women with individual change and choice. However, individual agency without collective action may not result in change. This is part of a wider debate that recognises continuing inequalities amongst women and girls; *some* girls and *some* women might have more opportunity to speak out, and exercise choice and power, but collective action is needed to challenge and change broader systems of power that oppress or discriminate against girls and women. This can be seen in movements such as #metoo which symbolise agency (power to speak against an oppressor), but is more complicated when considering how this movements challenges discrimination and harassment more extensively for all women to speak out about harassment and types of sexual abuse and harassment, and what power women have in these situations to challenge abuse as well as more effective law enforcement and safeguarding policies.

See Also; Feminism; Power; NGO; Sustainable Development

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