

Empowering Women through Microfinance: **Fundamentally Interesting** but Pragmatically Irrelevant

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Empowerment of women should not be started merely using coercion leading to conflicts in households but emphasizing on understanding and consensus. Empowerment begins with transformation and willingness to change. The realization of subordinated status and gender discrimination against women is the starting point of journey of women empowerment. There are differences in perceptions of what stakeholders (government NGOs, donors) of society believe about empowering women through microfinance and the way women (actors) perceive empowerment process itself. To emphasize this gap, the present paper explores observations made at the time of interacting with women of Gujarat on empowerment (through microfinance). Therefore, the objective of this paper is to analyze the perceptions and views of Gujarati women on empowerment through microfinance and critically examine the relationship between the same with the help of review of literature. The observations reveals acceptance of subordinated status; focus on intrinsic value of empowerment, avoiding independent decision making, considering loans as means of assistance and perceiving women as an object of development.

Key words: Micro-finance, women empowerment, gender discrimination, subordinated status, intrinsic value.

(Sometimes) People (women) unconsciously adapt their perceptions of what is desirable to their perceptions of what is possible.

– Amartya Sen (Cited by Kabeer N, 2013c)

INTRODUCTION

“If it is our fault....they (my husband) can beat too” answered a woman respondent politely when asked whether she has been beaten by her husband. It is believed that with the help of microfinance, women become economically empowered and for this to lead to improved well-being and social, political and legal empowerment without explicit attention to other dimensions of gender subordination. However, it was observed that violence in the household has increased as men feel increasingly threatened their role as primary income earners.

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Adapted Perceptions: Subordinated Status

Power is understood in terms of ability of one person to control or influence the behaviour or actions of the other person. When such power is accepted by the woman (in our case) as highlighted in the above statement; we can say that woman has internalized the belief of male dominant values. Amartya Sen, as cited by Naila Kabeer (1999a), has revealed the same logic in terms of “adapted perceptions”. Further Sen observed that “Acute inequalities often survive precisely by making allies out of the deprived. The underdog comes to accept the legitimacy of the unequal order and becomes an implicit accomplice”.

Why such belief of “internalized oppression” (in words of Rowlands, 1995) is accepted by women as survival mechanism? It is difficult to answer using single social theory. One of the explanations given by Distelhorst D (2005), using socialization and cultural programming theory, is that women and men are socialized very differently around issues of dominance and deference. Competition (Strive to win), hierarchy (take charge) and individualism (stand on your own) are seen as central to male behaviour. Men are therefore, acculturated to dominate and control. Women, on the other hand, are socialized to cooperate and collaborate with an emphasis on maintaining relationships above all else.

Intrinsic Value of Women Empowerment

“Do you participate in deciding when to have a child?” a question asked to women respondent is taken for granted and is not so important for her to answer except a formality to complete questionnaire. It is observed that asking women about empowerment also reflects differences in terms of value they attach with the empowerment itself. Further, women do not assign the same degree of value to empowerment the way researcher assigns. Therefore, empowerment of women can be analyzed in two different contexts. First, from intrinsic approach, how women value empowerment and set up preferences in terms of agency and the second is instrumentalist approach, analyzing powers that they have even if they do not value these. As cited by Rowlands (1995), according to Taliaferro (1991), true power cannot be bestowed; it comes from within. Similarly, woman can be facilitated for empowerment; but we cannot empower her on our own efforts; unless she desires to do so.

Independent Decision Making by Women

When a woman, in a village area, has been questioned: Do you purchase utensils for household independently? She replied that we (me and my husband) jointly decide on such issues rather than a single person taking decision. Further she explained that taking decisions independently does not always lead to empowerment; but it is the cooperation and mutual understanding that plays an important role. Kiran Bedi (2005), in her speech on women empowerment, supports the same logic saying that dominance in decision making is not always empowering itself but rather disempowers; in fact mutual decision making in house would empower women. As the word empowerment has derived from ‘power’; it is believed that it is a zero-sum game; the more power one person (husband in our case) has, the less the other (wife) has. However, Naila Kabeer (2013c) in her speech on women empowerment, asserts that feminist literature which has focused on power in terms of male domination does not rule out acknowledgement of man power but it puts focus on different notion of power; the power as the ability to transform oneself and other in the world.

Selling Girls

“I sold my daughter” is the answer given by a woman residing in a village; when she was asked about her daughter’s education. The language that women used to speak reflects their level of subordination. It was found that rural women have gender preferences too. As cited by Gupta K

& Yesudian P (2006), traditions such as dowry, as well as women's economic and social dependence on men throughout their life cycle, reinforce a preference for sons.

Loans means Assistance

“I will not form Self-help Group (SHG) because I have to pay money on behalf of other women borrowers being a leader of the group” said a leader of SHG in Rajkot when she was asked about her experience of working as a Group leader in SHG. Further she believed that at the time of taking money everybody promises to repay but when installment amount due nobody come for payment.

It is observed that poor women have internalized belief that microfinance loans are not commercial loans but it's a kind of assistance they would get from service providers. The perception is that if they understate their economic status; they would get further assistance. For the same reason microfinance women clients do not disclose real earnings and income levels of their family. They don't understand part of obligation of loan rather it's a cheaper source of raising money for them and using it for their own requirement. It is for the same reason why many SHG leaders have been found exiting from microfinance lending activities due to women clients defaulting at the time of loan becoming due. SHG leaders had to pay remaining amount to protect their credibility.

As explained by Throat (2005), Managing Director – NABARD that it is due to our banking system which has failed to internalize lending to the poor as a viable activity but only as a social obligation – something that had to be done because authorities wanted it so. Further it was translated into banking language of the day: Loans to the poor were part of social sector lending and not commercial lending; the poor were not borrowers, they were beneficiaries; poor beneficiaries did not avail of loans they availed of assistance.

Women: as 'Object' of Development

The programmes, administered by the 'outsiders' (who include government) view people as 'object' of development and the agencies make provisions of things and services “what they can rather than what people need” (Narayanan P, 2003). According to World Bank, empowerment is understood as enhancing an individual or group's capacity to make choices into desired actions and outcomes (Palier J. 2005). This capacity to make an effective choice is primarily influenced by two sets of factors: agency and opportunity structure. Agency is defined as an actor's ability

to make meaningful choices; that is, the actor is able to envisage options and make a choice. It is observed that empowered women are highly influenced by the organization through its socialization process they consider important. Most of organizations manipulate ‘agency’ and establish the identity of their own philosophy under the pretext of women empowerment. As marked by Aslanbeigui N, Oakes G. and Uddin N. (2010) the empowered woman is conceived as a construct, an artifact of specialists in women and development—chiefly academics trained in western universities, NGO officials, and state policy makers on gender matters. Empowerment, therefore, is mainly a consequence of what is done to women as opposed to what they do on their own behalf.

CONCLUSION

It is believed that empowerment refers to a process of giving power to someone. However, in actual sense, it is transformation of oneself that gradually transfer the power in his/her favour. Women, without willingness to change and process of consciousness, cannot be empowered immediately. Empowerment process requires that an actor (woman) herself move towards gaining power (confidently) rather than pushing up her (nervously) by third parties (like NGOs). As pushing up women for empowerment is temporary outcome and leads to exit (divorce or separation) from household.

Access to microfinance services serves as one of opportunities for poor women to empower; by availing the same, nobody can ensure that it will lead to empowerment of women. There are so many possibilities; rather than a predetermined set of outcomes. Further, as cited by Kabeer N. (2005b), which of these possibilities realized in practice will be influenced by host of factors including the philosophy that governs their delivery, the extent to which they are tailored to needs and interests of those they are intended to reach, the nature of relationships which govern their delivery and – that most elusive of all developmental inputs – the caliber and commitment of people who are responsible for delivery.

However, the most important aspect of women empowerment is that the degree of value a poor woman attaches with it; the higher the value; the greater chances of empowerment. Finally empowerment is not for all women; it is for those women that value (deserve) it most.

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