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Empowerment and Sources of Power as Perceived by Women of Eastern Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract

Social dynamics is changing as many government policies are meant for empowering women. The present study attempted to understand the indicators of empowerment and the sources of power as perceived by women. A total of 80 educated women participated in the study. The open ended interview was taken to know the indicators of empowerment and its sources. Through the content analysis of the narratives it emerged that unmarried women had emphasized upon education and economic independence as the most important indicators of empowerment. However, the married women had endorsed family and education as the most significant power indicators. Society, education, family, home environment, career, confidence, media, personal values and God had been emerged as sources of power in both groups in varied ranges. The study concludes that the through the means of education and economic independence women can be equipped with the competence and capacity to deal with different problems.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Education, Economic Independence, Personal Characteristics, Power Indicators

1. Introduction

India greatly values its heritage and culture established through the proven instances of many a strong women. Indian women are the binding force for all round health of a family and society. Even those women who stand shoulder to shoulder with men to make financial contribution in running of the household are failed to get any consideration and recognition because of age old norms of society. A woman in India is admired as a

personification of all powerful Shakti, the Mother Goddess on the one hand and burnt alive for dowry, sexually abused, beaten by husbands for trivial reasons, murdered unborn in the womb, raped and so forth. The feminist scholars have documented the adverse sex-ratios, poor life expectancy, and discrimination in literacy, nutrition, access to health care, economic opportunities, subjection to violence etc. are major threats to the well being of common and ordinary women (Rajan, 1998). This scenario is in contrast to ideological model of powerful women symbolized as Goddess (Sharma, 2003; Sangari & Chakrawarti, 1999). It may sound odd to talk about women empowerment in a country where crimes and violence against women are very high in rate. Under the popular conceptualization of empower the mainstream Indian women often do not qualify as empowered. In the present study women empowerment is conceived in very specific terms, referring to enhancing their position in all power structure of the society. Women empowerment means that the women have the power or capacity to regulate their day-to-day lives in the social, economic, political and psychological (i.e. decision making) terms and this power mobilize them from periphery to central positions.

In modern India the women is enjoying the 30% reservation in local bodies, but at the darker side the women is considered as second class citizen, and is relegated to an unimportant position in the society. Preference for son occupies the top place and female feticides are very common in many north Indian cities. Even the socialization of a girl child is aimed at making her mentally prepared to accept the stereotype role of Indian women (Chatterjee, 1988). These and many such social realities make the women to feel powerless and dependent on others.

The power is defined as the ability of one actor to overcome resistance in achieving a desired result (House, Umberson, & Landis, 1988, Pfeffer, 1981) or simply the ability to affect outcomes or get things done (Mintzberg, 1983). These definitions of power tailored by social psychologists embrace the view that power is embedded in a social relationship where one party (an individual or group) has (or is perceived to have) the ability to impose its will on another by virtue of the resources at its disposal (e.g. Blau, 1964; Dahl, 2007; Kaplan, 1964). Power in 'asocial' sense refers to the individual's capacity to influence physical and non-social aspects of environment (Ng, 1980). There exists a social dimension of power. The social power does not arise directly from the characteristics of the individual yielding power, but is dependent upon the relation between the individual and the place of that relation in the context of larger social structure (Secord & Backman, 1974).

French and Raven (1959) and French (1993) identification of power is one of the most influential framework for thinking about it. People achieve power over others through a number of channels each related to their possession of particular material and psychological resources. These resources are associated with rewards, coercion, expertise, legitimacy, likeableness and information.

The meaning of power changes dramatically as a function of the social categorization relationship between any perceiver and any power holder. Perception of power reflects the objective features of social reality. Although the Indian women are now granted equal status with men in many spheres of life but there is still a great discrepancy between the constitutional positions and the status of reality of humiliation and dreadful conditions. The constitutional amendments alone will not solve the problems of women unless and until women correspond this given power to perform effectively and efficiently with more consciousness and awareness of their rights and duties.

In this backdrop the present study has tried to answer two major research questions-

- What are the indicators of empowerment for both unmarried and married women of this part of eastern Uttar Pradesh?
- What are the sources from where women derive power?

2. Method

Sample: The sample consisted of 80 females (40 unmarried and 40 married women). The unmarried group was aged between 20-30 years and the married group was aged between 30-40 years. All of them were educated, having any professional qualification. They belonged to middle socio-economic status.

Measures: An open-ended in-depth interview was conducted with each participant for at least 30 minutes. The interview focused around two basic questions-

- What are the indicators of empowerment for female in general and for you in particular?
- What are the sources of this power for females?

The confidence level of each participant was also checked on a 5 point rating scale ranged from (5) very high to (1) very low.

Procedure: The participants were contacted at their homes individually and purpose of the study was explained to them. After their consent the researcher had taken interview. The thanks was given to them for their cooperation. The content analysis of interview data was made and major themes and categories of responses were sought.

3. Results

The perception of indicators of empowerment and sources of power are intermingled. Many women had talked about one thing as an indicator of empowerment and the other had emphasized that particular thing as a source of power. However, the indicators of empowerment and sources of power as perceived by married and unmarried women had been presented in two different tables i.e. table 1 & 2, respectively. Based on the content analysis of the responses about the indicators of empowerment six major themes have been emerged. The unmarried women had emphasized the personal dispositions like ability, intelligence, good nature, simplicity, overall personality etc. as indicators of empowerment more than the married women, who simply endorsed the intelligence, good nature and leadership quality as indicators of empowerment. Nevertheless, the percentages of these indicators were very less than that stated by unmarried women.

Besides the personal dispositions the psychological characteristics, which were perceived as power indicators by unmarried women were goal orientation, confidence, decision making, positive thinking, self independence, self respect and adjustment quality. The married women again had only thought decision making and self sufficiency as significant power indicators. Both the married and unmarried women had shown family support as an important power indicator. However, the percentage of unmarried women (75%) was significantly more than married women (37.5%).

Another major theme i.e. family and social factors were also favored by married women more than unmarried, especially, the family support. Interestingly, a sizeable percentage of married women had indicated kitchen work from where they sought power. In addition to this, normative and cultural indicators was the another major theme which emerged from the analysis. Here, again the difference comes in married and unmarried, as for unmarried women motherhood and having children is the single indicator of power, however, in case of married women most vital power indicator is motherhood followed by womanhood, God, experiences, law and order, religiousness and character. The last major theme from the data analysis come forth was economic indicators of empowerment which have subcategories like economic independence, job and money. Here, a substantial percentage of unmarried women thought economic independence (90%) and job (50%) as the major indicators of empowerment for them.

The analysis of narratives has explored five major themes regarding sources of empowerment (Table 2). At the individual or personal level (e.g. education, , God, career, economic independence, confidence, personal values, will power, personality, intelligence, behavior, thinking, patience, labor/effort, ability, experience, trust) those factors are categorized which are embodied to the person herself. Here, one can find major differences in married and unmarried women as education is emphasized by 70% unmarried women but only by 25% married women and a similar pattern can be seen for career, confidence, personal values intelligence etc. However, the married women are relying upon God, their will power and patience as sources of power.

India is a traditional society and with all the modernization still the collective culture prevails and its instances can be traced at more than one level. The women sample of the present study also showed that they perceive family, home environment, extension of family traditions and role in family as sources of power in the changing social system. At the community level factors (Table 2) both married and unmarried women are saying that the society in general and social situations in particular is very much important for inculcating power in women.

The results presented in table 2 also indicated that at the major theme of national level factors of sources of power many married women (37.5%) are perceiving media as a source of power but none of the unmarried sample. However, both married and unmarried women are perceiving law as a source of power.

4. Discussion

Society's standards and norms, both desired by tradition and as dictated by those strived to liberate women from them, have an impact on the women's perception of her performance and on her concept of her identity. Examining both the power indicators and sources of power separately had made it clear that women conceptualize both of these on the same parameter. However, the study had explored the areas from where these women of today derive power. It had an indication that unmarried women are deriving power by strengthening economic, personal and psychological arenas, however, when they got married, the sources of power start revolving around family support and family values. A worth emphasizing thing is that when a woman get married her whole frame of reference has been changed.

The interaction between social and economic aspects leads to perception of empowerment. Although, the economic independence is perceived as one of the most significant source of power, they also have the realization that this economic independence will be gained only by the means of education. The status of women would be improved only if they educate themselves and grab opportunity to become stronger and more powerful than before. The control of economic resources is a critical factor in the distribution of power in a family. Control over money appear to give women more say over family decisions related to that money and grants them a more central role in decisions. Control over money is especially empowering for women if they have control over more than just subsistence spending (Blumberg, 1991). Additionally, economic independence is an outcome of employment. Women's employment does not always reflect an increase in power. The simple fact about employment is that it may not bring sufficient guarantee for a woman especially a wife to have equal power with her husband. Researches on dual earner families' showed that the one reliable difference between the family power position of employed and non employed women lies in financial decision making. But being employed does not guarantee that women will be able to turn over half of the household work to her husband. The traditional gender based divisions persist in the mind set of women; they basically decide the household activity specially the food preparation and men make the financial decisions. But in the societies where employment offers women increased opportunities, giving them greater power over and access to key social resources, then it brings empowerment. Hence, for the unmarried women education, money, career, media and law are perceived as sources of power in the present changing social scenario.

Power also comes from establishing a rapport and building of an alliance with extended family and especially with children by married women. More than 80% women are deriving power by family and 50% married women are perceiving motherhood as source of power in the family. Traditional Indian culture place little importance on love between spouses, however, over emphasizes motherhood. The role of wife does not confer much power but married women do gain power by becoming mothers and that power is based on the affective bonds that develop with their children.

The findings of the study in general indicated that personal dispositions like ability, intelligence, good and dominating nature, simplicity, overall personality were more affirmed by unmarried women more than their married counterparts. Similarly, the psychological characteristics of goal orientation, confidence, decision making, positive thinking, and self respect were more emphasized by unmarried women. However, the married women had not given much importance to these personal and psychological characteristics. They had been emphasizing upon the familial, social, cultural and normative roots to gain power. This is because the Indian women are strongly attached to their families and believe in collective values (Verma & Pandey, 2005). Nevertheless, women have realized that education can play a pivotal role in bringing about the desirable behavioral changes among the women and equipped them in terms of knowledge, competence and capacity to handle problems.

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Table 1: Power Indicators responses made by two groups of Women

Major Themes	Subcategories of Indicators of empowerment	Percentages	
		Unmarried	Married
Personal Dispositions	Ability	95	--
	Intelligence	52.5	15
	Good Nature	45	15
	Simplicity	45	
	Dominating Nature	25	
	Overall Personality	25	
	Sacrifice	17.5	
	Knowledge	15	
	Leadership quality	15	15
	Will Power	---	
	Patience	12.5	
	Punctuality	5	3.5
	Physical Fitness	--	2
	Courage	--	
Psychological Characteristics	Goal Orientation	65	--
	Confidence	45	--
	Decision Making	37.5	25
	Positive Thinking	25	--
	Self-Independence	25	--
	Self- Sufficiency	--	25
	Self-Respect	20	--
	Adjustment Quality	15	--
Familial & Social	Family Support	75	37.5
	Kitchen	7.5	--
	Relationship	--	7.5
	Being in Group	5	--
	High Profile in Society	5	--
Normative & Cultural	Motherhood/Children	12.5	50
	Womanhood	--	37.5
	God	--	20
	Experience	--	15
	Law & Order	--	15
	Religiousness	--	12.5
	Character	--	10
Economic	Economic Independence	95	25
	Job	50	25
	Money	37.5	--

Table 2: Sources of Power as stated by two groups of Women

Major Themes	Subthemes of Sources of Power	Percentages	
		Unmarried	Married
Individual Level	Education	70	25
	God	--	52.5
	Career	45	30
	Economic Independence	45	--
	Confidence	40	25
	Personal Values	32.5	25
	Will power	--	30
	Personality	30	--
	Intelligence	25	17.5
	Behavior	25	--
	Thinking	25	--
	Patience	--	20
	Labor/Effort	20	--
	Ability	17.5	--
	Experience	15	17.5
	Trust	--	12.5
Interpersonal Level	Family	70	80
	Home Environment	65	70
	Extension of Family Tradition	37.5	10
	Role in Family	--	25
Community Level	Society	75	70
	Social Situations	12	7.5
	Regard & Respect	--	12.5
	Leadership	--	12.5
	Social Equality	--	7.5
	Teacher	10	--
	Caste	--	5
National Level	Media	--	37.5
	Law	27.5	27.5
	Democracy	--	15
	Rights	7.5	--