

Brief analyses of western writings on status of the women and feminist movement: To understand the origin of term women empowerment

Yapi Maling

PhD scholar

*Rajiv Gandhi University, Rono Hills
Doimukh, Itanagar, Papumpare District
Pin code- 791110*

Abstract

At present times, the concept of women empowerment is popularized in every corner of the world. Different scholars, thinkers, writers, feminists, world leaders, religious preachers and academicians have their own way of understanding and explanations of this concept. There are no specific events to determine the formal introduction of term empowerment in relation with the concept of women but it is believed that from the very beginning of feminist movement itself, this concept started to recognize with women rights. At the same time, narrow attributes towards women by some male thinkers justified the right of patrilineal society which was also considered as one of the factors which sow the seeds of realization of term empowerment among women group. Another important part of this paper is that past historical events will be also analyzed in order to understand how all these events ultimately connect term empowerment to women from different universe. However, till these days, women from different parts of the universe are struggling to achieve fullest form of empowerment. Therefore, this paper will try to analyze and understand the various factors which may give effect to the universal recognition of term women empowerment.

Key words: Origin, Factors, meaning, women empowerment.

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I. Introduction

At present time, the term empowerment has become widely used term throughout the world. In its initial period, the concept of empowerment was struggling to find its specific place for universal recognition. Before the term started to be recognized with the women, the movement for women's right was already emerged with the Seneca Falls convention originally known as the Woman's rights convention fought for the social, civil and religious rights of women in 1848 in the United States. This convention was called as the first women movement. This women movement was taking place because for centuries, the societies have been denied to recognize women's right as a human right. At first, there was limited meaning of the concept of empowerment but various forms of women movements made this term more complex and comprehensive in nature. It is believed that term was officially emerged from several critiques and debates generated by women's movement throughout the world particularly by the feminists from the third world country (Tandon, 2016:2).

Overall, this movement involves political, sociological theories and philosophies which concerned about the issues of indifference gender (www.cfr.org; 2019, p-3). The women movement also known as feminist movement which can also be used to describe a political, cultural or economic movement to empower women with an aim to establish equal rights and legal protection. It shows considerable variations among regions in timing, character, influence and effectiveness because of which one could also find variations to understand the concept of term women empowerment. The women movement was also considered as one of the important events to provide universal platform to different thinkers to discuss and debate on the concept of women empowerment.

Factors determined the emergence of term Women Empowerment:

Feminism has altered predominant perspectives in a wide range of areas within Western society, ranging from culture to law. The representation and status of women in western and European countries were also restrictive and oppressive like any other part of the Asian, African and South Asian countries. However, in the words of Cato, the Censor, Roman statesman: "All men, rule over women, we Romans' rule over all men,

and our wives rule over us” (Afsar, B.; 2003) but in law, women had an inferior status in Roman society too. This kind of statement reflected that although men are considered themselves remain under control of women but it was within four walls of the house not in public domain or not in terms of political power. This kind of practices seemed to appease the women to not realized their actual power in public domain. Therefore, following are some important analyses were made in order to understand the emergence of term empowerment in relations with status of women in western part of the world.

1. Thinker’s view

During the era of Greek Philosophers, two important thinkers tried to give overview of position of women in their society. Firstly, Idealist thinker like Plato made no distinction of the sexes in his ideal “Republic”. In his view they have similar, in capacities and power, but he admits that women are naturally inferior to men. At the same time, he purposed for common education for all, however in his communism of family and property, he directed the rulers not to have wife and children which directly indicated that he was also not in the support of women to become a ruler. Although he was not directly denied that women should not be part of politics but in his theory, he gave more preference to men instead of women. Another Greek Philosopher, Aristotle had unshakeable faith that women are best suited for household chores and considered man as its natural ruler. He considered that children, women and slaves didn’t have reasoning power, so they need to put under control of reasoning being i.e., Men. It seems that unlike in Roman period, the Greek city-state itself were considered women as vulnerable creature (Beauvoir, p-130; www.gender.cawater.info, 2019; Bano; 2003).

With the passing of time, two important events have been evolved i.e., the period of Renaissance (ca. 1400–1600) and eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment, considered as an eye opener event for women. In the period of Enlightenment, women began to take advantage of new intellectual trends, such as the novel (www.saylor.org/p-1). It was believed that the representation and attitude toward women started to gradually improve, particularly through the medium of literature. These social outlets enabled them to have more of a public voice. Furthermore, the Enlightenment, while continuing to promote strict gender roles in general and also threw first signs of feminism through the personality like Martin Luther. He adopted a new idealistic approach to Christian religion developed in Protestantism (www.saylor.org.p-3; Bano; 2003). The Protestants advocated an honourable and equal status for women like men. The Protestant reformers also advocated universal compulsory and free education for all classes and for both men and women, but this protestant revolt did not put strong influence in all the countries of Europe.

This period also witnessed the emergence of western political thinkers like John Locke and Hobbes and both the philosopher recognised that familial authority belonged to the mother as well as to the father. Another Socialist thinker, Jean Jacques Rousseau introduced the philosophy of naturalism in education where he did not follow the principle of equality in the education of men and for him; woman was only required to please man (Beauvoir, ed. 2011, p- 155; Bano; 2003). According to utilitarian thinker like Jeremy Bentham, he wanted to put untapped brains and energies of women in use and James Stuart Mill suggested that if women wanted to emancipate themselves than they must keep themselves happy and only they will add happiness to the society. As per the opinion of socialist thinkers like Marx and Engels, both the thinkers emphasized that the subordination of women is because of the emergence of the private property. It can be said that the events and writing of thinkers were highly influenced the western community to prescribe role for the women in the society. From the very beginning itself, the status of the women is considered as a living being who are physically weak and mentally not fit to take decision for themselves, so societal arena compel them to follow the order of men who are considered as mentally as well as physically fit for any situation.

2. Feminist’s view

After the event of enlightenment and renaissance in western country, another phase was evolved for change especially in the status of women which was led by the feminist. It had been started to witness in public parlance e.g. in 1791, period of French Revolution in response to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, Olympe De Gouge published the pamphlet, Déclaration des droits de la Femme et de la Citoyenne ("Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen") (Kuiper, Kathleen; 2021, p-1). In that pamphlet, for the first time, she expressed her famous statement, "A woman has the right to mount the scaffold, and she must possess equally the right to mount the speaker's platform." Gouges' Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen had been widely reproduced and influenced the writings of women's advocates in the Atlantic world. One year after its publication, in 1792, the keen observer of the French Revolution, Mary Wollstonecraft published Vindication of the Rights of Woman. Writings on women and their lack of rights became widely available (Beauvoir, ed; 2011, p-148). The feminist writers like Gouge and Wollstone tried their best to maintain status of western women’s rights as Human rights, but at the same time it can be said that different thinkers and writers have different viewed on women’s status (Beauvoir, ed. 2011: 190).

Therefore, from above it can be said that from the past, the position of women in the society was always a topic for discussion and empowerment concept never been discussed openly but demanding of different forms of rights for women already indicates indirect demand for empower itself. However, with the passing of time, urge to get equal rights in every sector among women group getting more determined.

3. Important events led to the realization of term Women Empowerment

In the later part of nineteenth century and the beginning of twentieth century, the women's education began to spread which help them to understand their rights being a human. Further the political upheavals and revolutions in USSR, France, India and China made the women aware of their enslavement by the male members of the society. The women began to demand for equal rights with men. Most impacted events which shakened the inner conscience of women to fight for their rights and compelled them to ask questions about their important place in the society are like;

- The Industrial Revolution in Europe brought a new era in the emergence of women from their homes to engage various other vocations. It inspired women movement for bringing change in their status and position.
- French Revolution with the announcement for Man's rights and man's citizenship rights really created havoc in French society, which forced feminist like Marie gouge and Wollenstone spoke and wrote against their government. Both the French feminist writers also demanded for women's right being citizen of French society.
- The First World War brought dramatic change in the image of woman by creating job opportunity and they started to assert their freedom of dress and in smoking and drinking in public.
- The Second World War brought almost four million new women workers. There was an upsurge in the demand of women's equal rights with men (Afsar; 2003). The women education spread rapidly because of which the women now entered in all types of professions along with the right to speak in the public, to vote for and hold office. By the middle of the twentieth century women's liberation movements became more vigorous and involved more and more women's organization, in Europe, in general and in America, in particular. The women presented new cult of feminism by demanding full social equality (Edmondson; 1984, p-305; Afsar;2003).

The experience gained from event of enlightenment and renaissance, French revolution, American war of Independence, Era of 1st and 2nd world war created the collective consciousness among women about their important role in the society. Apart from all these events, the feminist propagator also played important role to highlight the women rights in every events. The Feminist like Katherine Hepburn spoken of the "feminist movement" in the 1942 film Woman of the Year, Simone de Beauvoir wrote in her treatise "The Second Sex", analyzed of women's oppression and a foundational tract of contemporary feminism, whereas in Betty Friedan's The Feminine Mystique (1963) criticized the idea that women could only find fulfillment through childrearing and homemaking (History and the theory of feminism; 2019, p-3; <http://www.gender.cawater>). Initially the movement was not started in revolutionary way but few feminists writers like Olympe De Gouge, Mary Wollenstone, Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Christine de Pizan, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa and Modesta di Pozzo di Forzi, Marie Le Jars de Gournay, Anne Bradstreet and Francois Poullain de la Barre started to question discrimination prevailed against women in the society. All these events pushed women to raise voice for their basic rights. Finally, their realization of being dominated from ages took shape revolutionary attitude in different phase and which gave birth to the different meaning of term empowerment in relation with women. All the women movements represented infinite understanding of the concept of women empowerment and it will be more cleared through the different waves of feminist movement as discussed below;

The feminist waves and their demands

After realizing their important place in the society, the feminist movement took into revolutionary shape. The women from different parts of the country started to join feminist movements to achieve ultimate means of the empowerment. Many scholars believed that the first feminist wave was started during nineteenth and early twentieth century, mainly focused to women's suffrage movements (mainly concerned women's empowerment with women's right to vote). With this demand, the first countries in the world to grant female suffrage were New Zealand in 1893 and Australia in 1902;

The second feminist waves started in the 1960s and 1970s, this waves focused on ideas and actions associated with the women's liberation movement (which campaigned for legal and social rights for women) and;

The last or third wave of feminist movement concentrated on a continuation of, and a reaction to the perceived failures of second-wave feminism which was begun from beginning in the 1990s to the present. The Feminist activists have campaigned for women's legal rights (rights of contract, property rights, voting rights); for women's right to bodily integrity and autonomy, for abortion rights, and for reproductive rights (including access to contraception and quality prenatal care); for protection of women and girls from domestic violence, sexual harassment and rape; for work place rights, including maternity leave and equal pay; against misogyny;

and against other forms of gender-specific discrimination against women (www.gender.cawater, 2019, p-1; Penny A. Pasque, and Brenton, Wimmer, 2000).

Many scholars believed that in the history of feminist movements, most of the leaders were predominantly by middle-class white women from Western Europe and North America. and in this period, the term empowerment was not gained so much popularity in worldwide especially in relation with women. But this trend had been accelerated in the 1960s with the Civil Rights movement in the United States and the collapse of European colonialism in Africa, the Caribbean, parts of Latin America and Southeast Asia. Since that time, women from former European colonies and the Third World have proposed for "Post-colonial" and "Third World" feminisms. The new Postcolonial Feminists were Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and African feminists, Angela Davis and Alice Walker (www.gender.cawater, 2019, p-2) and it is considered as the period when the concept of women empowerment was finally reached worldwide. Although term empowerment already existed from very long period with infinite meaning of nature but there was growing interaction between feminism and the concept and practice of popular education, based on the 'conscientization' approach developed by Paulo Freire in Latin America in the 1970s as part of his 'liberation theology'(Batliwala,2007:3).The concept was emerged from the field of social work especially from the work of Paulo Friere's advocacy of popular education to enable oppressed groups to develop critical consciousness, where he for the first time discussed about the concept of empowerment in a formal way (Neil, Domingo and Valters, 2014 :-4).

In the 1970's , another waves of feminists took place in the third world country with new outlook of demand for empowerment by restructuring of development approach in order to provide social, political and economic justice to every corner of women in the world. They also contended that structural transformation of unjust power relations would happen only through formations of grassroots women's organization and their public education and mobilizations activities. After that in the 1980's during the period of economic recession, serious endebtmnt, and stabilization policies, women's movements became an object of policy concern, as their potential as vehicles for the delivery of goods and services to those in need was realized (Molyneux ; 2001,p-2). With the passing of time, feminists from America and UK started to use term empowerment to challenge the patriarchy structures with assertion "personal is political". They realized power has been sharing in personal level not just in between men and women as well as in public arena but it was remained at the margin of international development (Tam, O'Neil, Pillar, Domingo and Craig, Valters, 2014, p-4).The interplay of these powerful new discourses led, by the mid-1980s, to the spread of 'women's empowerment' as a more political and transformant idea for struggles that challenged not only patriarchy, but also the mediating structures of class, race, ethnicity – and, in India, caste and religion – which determined the nature of women's position and condition in developing societies. The1995Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing played a critical role in introducing the 'e' word to state actors, and governments anxious to demonstrate a progressive approach to gender quickly adopted the catchphrase of women's empowerment (Batliwala,2007:4).

Results of analyses: -

From the above discussion, it has been found that in the past, the term empowerment was first advocated byPaulo Freire from Latin America. He presented the first formal meaning of empowerment which meant to provide for popular education to liberate the oppressed groups from the clutch of more advance and powerful groupsby develop critical consciousness. It seemsthe word empowerment is not just about dealing with women, but women are just one of its agents. The word empowerment is formed from two components: en/em+ power. The first element 'en' or 'em' is a preposition often used as a prefix on other words. It comes from Latin in-, meaning "in, into, towards". The "in/im" spelling was often used in the past. The en"/em" version comesfrom the French version of the Latin. The Second element, 'power', comes from Anglo-French – pourer, pouair, which is from old French word povoir. This evolved from Latin word potere, which meant "to be able to". Thus, according to its etymology, the word empowerment means "enable" (Yadav,2016:5). The word empowerment clearly connected with the term power and in turn the connotation of power related with the word control, which means control over the resources such as natural resources, financial resources and human resources such as skills, labour, or intellectual resources including information, ideas and knowledge etc. in the context of human society.

Secondly, the term empowerment got attached to women word because of feminist movement from different corners. The different events like renaissance, industrial revolution, 1st and 2nd world war etc. also helped women to develop self-consciousness and realized their power to take up responsibility of their family when their male counterparts were not with them during war.

Thirdly, the broad and very complex meaning of women empowerment is presented in all the three important events of feminist waves. The concept is infinite in nature because it was used by different scholars and feminist based on their own situation and level of understanding. Till date this concept does not have uniformity in its concept.

Lastly, it can be said that power to know one-self is one of the ultimate empowerments of each individual.

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