Chapter - VI

Empowerment of Women - A Theoretical View
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Empowerment is a broad based concept and is discussed here in relation to women. The meaning and the definitions of the Term, dimensions of empowerment, flowering of a new concept on women empowerment in 1980s multiple meanings and interpretations in 1990s are discussed below, to provide a focus towards the theoretical components of the concept of empowerment and to further discuss the case of Muslim women.

The chief predicament of a woman lies in her very precarious condition of not being seen as a total human being. Different aspects of her entity and life are perceived differently and are emphasised independently of each other. This mode of perception of a woman not only deprives her of her whole identity but also renders her vulnerable to various kinds of exploitation.1 Deeply ingrained social beliefs, social customs biased against women, and various facets of popular culture such as cinema, TV and popular literature contribute to reinforce these overreaching stereotypical images and identity of women. The production and construction of such gender identities is a long drawn out process and is rooted in history and structure of society. A woman is depicted as a signifier of societal prestige and purveyor of cultural value. She is seen as a symbol of the honour of the family, community and even nation. She is also the target of male dominance and it is in this context, the issue of empowerment is discussed.2

The Meaning of the term ‘Empowerment’:

The practice of ‘empowering’ people, so that they can have some control over various aspects of their lives, is a relatively new one in the field of Community Work.3 The term ‘Empowerment’, itself, has not been in existence for long. What this term means, how it can be used by community workers, and the consequences of its usage, are focussed here.
Definitions of Women's Empowerment:

Empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation, to greater decision making power and control, and to transformative action.

Empowerment is "the process of challenging existing power relations and of gaining greater control over the sources of power." The goals of women's empowerment are to challenge patriarchal ideology to transform the structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination and social inequality and to enable poor women to gain access to, and control over, both material and informational resources.

It is important to consider which of the strategies developed and used by women have empowered them. The strategies considered effective are those, which increase the quality of women's lives by enabling them to contribute to the decision-making processes in their communities and societies, to achieve a more equal status with men, and to participate in changing their environments in the direction of greater social justice and democracy.

Dimensions of Empowerment:

Personal: developing a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity, and undoing the effects of internalized oppression.

Relational: developing the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of a relationship and decision made within it.

Collective: where individuals work together to achieve a more extensive impact than each could have had alone. This includes involvement in political structures, but might also cover collective action based on co-operation rather than competition.

Socio-economic gender relations are determined mainly by an interplay of
factors in which societal structure, historical specificity, cultural norms and practices, political ideologies and economic condition prevalent in a society play a dominant role.

Concept of women Empowerment : Theories

The Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration (United Nations, 1996), frames the issue of women's equality as a human right and advocates the active facilitation of women's empowerment. The Declaration has essentially said "We are determined to intensify efforts to ensure equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all women and girls, who face multiple barriers to their empowerment and advancement because of such factors as their race, age, language, ethnicity, culture, religion, or disability, or because they are indigenous people." 

At the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in 1995, the former United Nations Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali noted in his introductory speech that, "the Platform for Action is a powerful agenda for the empowerment of women". The President of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn (1995), also used the rhetoric of empowerment in his speech to the conference: "all the evidence tells us that not to empower women is a tragically missed opportunity - not only to create a more just, but also a more prosperous society. Empowering women, by the same token, means ensuring their full participation in every aspect of development."

The increasing use of the term 'women's empowerment' by various development actors have resulted in its multiple meanings and interpretations, and its association with a diversity of strategies. For example, within mainstream development discourse of the 1990s, it is often used by organizations focussed on enlarging the choices and productivity levels of individual women, for the most part, in isolation from a feminist agenda; and in the context of a withdrawal of state responsibility for broad-based economic and social support. However, in the seventies, when the concept was first invoked by Third World feminists and Women's organisations, the term was explicitly used to frame and facilitate the struggle for social justice and women's equality through
a transformation of economic, social and political structures at national and international levels. Though many feminists working on development issues have continued to pursue this transformative approach, women's empowerment is often narrowly interpreted in development agendas, for example as “participation in decision-making”, “increased access to productive resources” and “expanded choices”. What are the ways in which, and why has, the more transformatory interpretation of women’s empowerment been partially replaced with a more restricted focus on the expansion of choices for, and participation of, individual women?

We argue that this revision, and partial silencing and erasure of the original meaning or intent of women’s empowerment in development discourse are challenges to feminists to continually reclaim and refine the concept in its original form. In this study interpretations of and strategies for, women’s empowerment within the economic and political situations, and the spatial and temporal contexts from which they have been produced are projected. Besides, the meanings of women’s empowerment through an exploration of several definitions, as articulated by feminist scholars, women’s organisations and multilateral institutions are also traced.

**Women’s Empowerment : A New Concept in the 1980s**

The origin of the concept of women’s empowerment can be traced to the latter half of the 1970s when it was increasingly discussed and promoted by Third World feminists and women’s organisations. Sen and Grown, in their analysis of three decades of development policies aimed at women, state that the concept was initially developed when many feminist scholars and activists, including those involved with Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era (DAWN), engaged in the project of constructing a coherent framework through which to understand “development, social and economic crises, the subordination of women and feminism”. Thus, the original call for women’s empowerment is located within a theoretical framework that emphasizes the subordination of women, as well as the roles of colonialism and
development policy in shaping the position of developing countries and women and
men in the international world order. In addition, it recognized the importance of
women's agency and self-transformation. Antrobus, states that empowerment is a
process that enables a powerless woman to develop autonomy, self-control and
confidence and, with a group of women and men, a sense of collective influence over
oppressive social conditions. She argues that when women begin to understand gender
oppression and organize to change ways in which different institutions sanction and
facilitate their treatment as second class citizens, the collective empowerment of women
will occur. Antrobus also notes that empowerment can occur at the individual level.
By enabling the construction of a more equal and just society, the process of women's
empowerment results in a “redistribution of power within, as well as between societies”
and groups. This is accomplished, in part, through activities “ranging from acts of
individual resistance to mass political mobilizations that challenge basic power
relations”.

In the vision offered by DAWN, and interpretation of feminism that embraces
complexity and difference is assumed to be essential to accommodate a more complete
understanding of women's lives as well as facilitate empowerment. “There is, and
must be, a diversity of feminisms responsive to the different and multiple needs and
concerns of women, and defined by them for themselves”. However in an effort to
curb relativistic arguments that could be derived from the above approach, the scholars
associated with DAWN underlined that recognition of diversity must also be informed
by a feminist analysis of the “universal elements of gender subordination”. According
to Sen and Grown, empowerment strategies thus informed will result in changes in
cultural, economic and political institutions and processes, sites in which gender
subordination is embedded and perpetuated. As a result, empowerment processes
may not occur in a linear progression, and can sometimes have contradictory effects,
encompassing both resistance and consent.
Antrobus uses Moser's concepts of practical and strategic gender needs and interests to clarify her notion of women's empowerment. According to Moser, practical gender interests are derived from practical gender needs, which are those that result from women's everyday realities and are typically a response to an immediate perceived necessity, such as food or health care. They do not "challenge prevailing forms of subordination even though they arise directly out of them". Thus, development approaches that only address practical gender needs and interests will not necessarily result in women's empowerment. However, it is important to note that by organising around immediate (or practical) needs and negotiating the challenges that result, women often develop a deeper awareness of the necessity for more fundamental changes in power structures and in their relations with men. Strategic gender interests are formulated from an analysis of women's subordination to men and are directly related to women's empowerment. A focus on strategic gender interests is critical because "practical gains are easily reversed if strategic gender interests have not been addressed".

Thus, the initial theoretical framework through which the original concept of women's empowerment was produced acknowledged inequalities between men and women, women's subordination in the family, the community, the market, and the state, and emphasized that women experience oppression differently according to their race, class, colonial history and their country's position in the international economic order. In addition, it maintained that women have to challenge oppressive structures and processes simultaneously, and at multiple levels, thereby creating the space for empowerment to occur at both the individual and collective levels. Such an analysis of institutions is often lacking in the 1990s, a point we will discuss below.

The Third World feminists also acknowledged the importance of women's increased power that is implicit within the concept of women's empowerment, but they attempted to identify power, less in terms of domination over other (with its implicit
assumption that a gain for women (implies a loss for men), and more in terms of the capacity of women to increase their self-reliance and internal strength. This is identified as the right to determine choices in life and to influence the direction of change, through the ability to gain control over crucial material and non material resources.25

In other words they accepted that men and institutions often possess “power over” women, but argued that women do not want to gain power over men. Instead, these scholars focussed their analyses and attention on the argument that women want to increase their capabilities and capacities in order to have “power to” make life choices and be self-reliant.26

Critical analyses of the strategies promoted during the United Nations Decade the Advancement of Women also informed the original concept of women’s empowerment?7. The majority of the Decade’s programmes and projects primarily facilitated women’s increased access to productive resources and their active participation in development processes. According to Sen and Grown (1987), the underlying assumption of many of the Decade’s programmes was that the main problem for women in the Third World was their insufficient participation in an otherwise benevolent process of growth and development.28 Thus, increasing women’s participation and improving their shares in resources, land, employment and income relative to men were seen as both necessary and sufficient to effect dramatic improvements in their living conditions.

However, after critically analyzing several of these programmes and projects, many Third World feminists and their allies discovered that though necessary, gaining/increasing access to productive resources and participation in development processes were insufficient for women’s empowerment,29 in addition, they maintained that though undervalued, women’s work at home was of central importance to development, and argued that the recognition of this fact was essential for both development processes and women’s empowerment.30
In fact, the "development process" itself was understood as a regime that contributed to the subordination of women. For example, Sen and Grown, argued that specific economic processes and development strategies, including those aimed at satisfying the requirements of an economy open to the flows of foreign private capital and the expansion of the foreign trade sector, (and) the propositions that free trade and free capital flows lead to an optimal allocation of scarce resources to the mutual benefit of all countries result in the further marginalization of Third World countries and poor women and men, and the subordination of women. In other words, they argued that the development approaches of the 1970s and 1980s, that aimed to improve women's productive capacities within the framework of the market system, often led to the further marginalization and subordination of women and girls.  

In addition, the limited success of this "integrationalist" or what Moser refers to as the "equity," approach was "due in part to the difficulties of overcoming traditional cultural attitudes and prejudices regarding women's participation in economic and social life". The latter being an essential element of women's empowerment given that women's subordination is deeply embedded in the consciousness of both men and women and "reinforced through religious beliefs, cultural practices, and educational systems" that assign lesser status and power to women. The attainment of women's empowerment is also contingent on the extent to which the humanity of women and girls is recognized, including their right to self-determination and autonomy, and the extent to which changes in patriarchal structures are facilitated. Arguably, the development strategies deployed during the Decade for Women did not view this as a priority, but assumed that it would occur, to some degree, through women's increased participation in the market economy.  

This understanding of women's empowerment was produced and deployed in a decade in which the world experienced an increase in poverty, despite specific international efforts to reduce poverty levels and promote growth and development in
Third World countries: Many African and Asian countries experienced environmental and political crises that threatened their food security, while countries in Latin America and the Caribbean endured financial and monetary crises that worsened living conditions.

Several high wage countries began to introduce economic restructuring policies that promoted privatization and cuts in social spending. In addition, across developing countries there were sharp reductions in the availability of external resources. The World Bank responded by shifting its 1970s focus of meeting basic needs to the promotion of structural adjustment in the 1980s.

Work for change within existing structures or work to transform those structures make it possible to form alliances with other organisations, to assert the need for autonomy, or to work within existing organisations as appropriate enable women to link the struggle against gender subordination to those against national, racial and class oppression where these issues are bound together.

Thus, women’s empowerment was assumed to be attainable through different points of departure, including political mobilization, consciousness raising and education. In addition, changes, where and when necessary, in laws, civil codes, systems of property rights, control over our bodies, and the social and legal institutions that underwrite male control and privilege, were assumed to be essential for the achievement of women’s equality. Thus, these scholars argue, the enabling conditions for women’s empowerment include participatory democracy, critical self-reflection and collective action. As a goal, it also requires long-term systematic strategies aimed at challenging prevailing structures as well as the building of state accountability.

Given this, Sen and Grown and Antrobus argue that women’s organisations have the most potential to facilitate women’s empowerment. These organisations are oriented to developing new structures and cultures that reflect women’s needs,
interests and behavioural preferences. The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a trade union which has organized more than 40,000 poor women workers in the state of Gujarat, India is an example of an organization that is attempting to empower women.40 This organization was established in 1972 when a group of headloaders, garment vendors, junksmiths and vegetable hawkers came together to form a workers' association.41 According to Ela Bhatt, "organization's like SEWA represent a new phenomenon in the history of organizing. Unlike the localized one-issue movements, they tackle the multitude of problems surrounding the working and living conditions of self-employed women working in many different trades and occupations".42 For example, SEWA is engaged in struggles for women's right to work, to earn fair wages, to work in better conditions, and to have legal protection and social security. In addition, it is organizing to construct the space for women to play constructive roles in national development. Bhatt defines organizing as the means "to bring people together to think through their common problems, to agree on their common issues, to decide on common action, and to forge common ideologies".43 Like Sen and Grown and Antrobus, she notes that in "order to be effective the struggle has to be waged at various levels" - the local, national and international.44

Women's Empowerment: Multiple Meanings in the 1990s

A survey of the literature on women's empowerment in the 1990s reveals a much greater diversity of interpretation in comparison to the eighties. Several writers underline the original argument that, as both a process and a goal, women's empowerment is fundamentally connected to democratization, human right and the self determination of women and men, while others invoke a somewhat narrow definition situated within a framework of expanded choices and participation in existing structures (examples of which are discussed below). As Rowlands notes, empowerment has become "a buzzword for the 1990s".45 Kabeer points out that empowerment is sometimes used to encompass, and/or is associated with, a cluster of distinct but
frequently overlapping concepts including rights, interests, autonomy, agency, well being, inequality, power and powerlessness. In addition, development agencies began to design projects “to empower women”.46

Ironically, the 1990s witnessed an increased concentration of economic power in the hands of corporations, and state decentralization with an increased emphasis on private-sector-driven growth and trade and investment liberalisation. Internationally, there is an increasing integration of markets across borders, facilitated by a surge in technological innovations centered on information technology and decreases in communication and transportation costs. In the late 1990s this manifestation of economic globalisation continues to be geographically uneven and tends to accelerate a tripolarization of industrial development in North America, Western Europe and Japan. In addition, globalisation is associated with growing inequality within and between countries, and for many of the world’s population, it also means growing impoverishment.47 According to the Human Development Report (United Nations, 1999), if global opportunities are not better shared, the failed growth of the last decades will continue. More than 80 countries still have per capital incomes lower than they were a decade or more ago. 55 countries, mostly in Sub-Saharan Africa and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States have had declining per capita incomes.48

Within this macroeconomic context, Batliwala, revisits the concept of women’s empowerment in a paper addressing family planning policies.49 She volunteers a definition and suggests specific components and stages of empowerment from “insights gained through a study of grassroots programmes in South Asia”. For her, empowerment is “the process of challenging existing power relations and of gaining greater control over the sources of power”. More specifically she states that the term empowerment refers to a range of activities, from individual self-assertion to collective resistance, protest and mobilization that challenge basic power relations. For individuals
and groups where class, caste, ethnicity and gender determine their access to resources and power, their empowerment begins when they not only recognize the systematic forces that oppress them, but act to change existing power relationships. Thus, Batliwala adopts the original feminist intent of women’s empowerment as individual and/or collective participation in various activities “aimed at changing the nature and direction of systematic forces which marginalize women”. She also notes that empowerment partially entails a redistribution of power, whether between nations, classes, castes, races, genders or individuals.

Batliwala, like the Third World feminist scholars discussed above, interprets empowerment as both a process and a goal. She states that: The goals of women’s empowerment are to challenge patriarchal ideology (male domination and women’s subordination); transform the structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination and social inequality (the family, caste, class, religion, educational processes and institutions, the media, health practices and systems, laws and civil codes, political processes, development models, and government institutions); and enable poor women to gain access to, and control of, both material and informational resources.

In other words, she argues that to have a transformative effect, the process of women’s empowerment must become a political force, i.e. an organized mass movement that challenges and transforms existing power structures. In particular, she envisages empowerment ultimately resulting in the formation of mass organisations of poor women, at the national, regional and international levels, which will form strategic alliances with other organisations of the poor, such as trade unions and tenant farmers groups. Thus, Batliwala envisages a space and role for men in the empowerment process, though she notes that there are situations in which women will have to act without men’s active support.
For Batliwala, as well as for other feminist activists discussed above, successful empowerment strategies also require the direct involvement of women in the planning and implementation of projects, through not necessarily with the same intensity at all times. She states that the process of empowerment evolves like a spiral, involving changes in consciousness, the identification of target areas for change, and analyses of actions and outcomes, “which leads in turn to higher levels of consciousness and more finely honed and better executed strategies”. As a result, empowerment cannot be a “top down or one way process”, nor can there be a fixed formula for its achievement. In addition, Batliwala, explicitly addresses the widespread confusion and anxiety regarding the popular presupposition that there is a necessary link between women’s empowerment and the disempowerment of men. Building on the theory that women and men working together can facilitate women’s empowerment, she argues that “women’s empowerment also liberates and empowers men, both in material and psychological terms”.

Women greatly strengthen the impact of political movements dominated by men - not just by their numbers, but by providing new energy, insights, leadership and strategies. Men are freed from the roles of oppressor and exploiter, and from gender stereotyping, which limits the potential for self-expression and personal development in men as much as in women.

Thus, the “empowerment spiral” affects everyone involved, “the individual, the activist agent, the collective and the community”. However, Batliwala, does not fully address the potential decrease in male privilege that can result from women’s empowerment. Nevertheless, the tension between women’s empowerment (as defined above) and the potential loss of male privilege is real and does occur, for example, in societies that introduce changes in land ownership to enable women to own land. Other feminists authors have contributed by identifying various dimensions of women’s empowerment. Stromquist, in her article on educational empowerment for women,
interprets empowerment as a “socio-political concept that goes beyond formal political participation and consciousness raising”.

She argues that a “full definition of empowerment as a socio-political concept must include cognitive, psychological, political and economic components”. She explains that:

i. the cognitive dimension refers to women having an understanding of the conditions and causes of their subordination at the micro and macro levels. It involves making choices that may go against cultural expectations and norms;

ii. the economic component requires that women have access to, and control over, productive resources, thus ensuring some degree of financial autonomy. However, she notes that changes in the economic balance of power do not necessarily alter traditional gender roles or norms.

iii. the political element entails that women have the capability to analyze, organize and mobilize for social change; and

iv. the psychological dimension includes the belief that women can act at personal and societal levels to improve their individual realities and the society in which they live.

Stromquist notes that there is general agreement that these components are interrelated. In her essay on non formal education as a means to empowerment, Monkman, adopts the components listed above and argues for the inclusion of a fifth component. She posits that there is a physical element - having control over one’s body and sexuality and the ability to protect oneself against sexual violence - to the empowerment process. However useful for the formulation of empowerment strategies, the sense of discreteness promoted by a compartmentalization of empowerment into different components has the potential negative effects of encouraging and promoting incomplete understandings of the realities of women’s lives. The result can be the
implementation of "empowerment strategies" that fail to engage with the complexities of women's subordination. For example, Monkman argues that when literacy is defined as a discrete skill, "training is unlikely to address needs beyond those related to deciphering and producing basic written language".57

In her study of selected empowerment strategies implemented by specific South Asian non-governmental organisations (NGOs), Batliwala identifies three approaches to women's empowerment.

i) integrated development

ii) economic development; and

iii) consciousness raising and organizing among women.

She notes that these are not mutual exclusive categories, but argue that they are useful for distinguishing between the various causes of "women's powerlessness" and among the different interventions thought to lead to empowerment.58

i. The integrated development approach interprets women's powerlessness to be a result of their "greater poverty and lower access to health care, education, and survival resources". Batliwala states that strategies deployed under this approach aim to enhance women's economic status through the provision of services. This approach improves women's everyday realities by assisting them in meeting their survival and livelihood needs, i.e. their practical needs.

ii. The economic development approach situates "women's economic vulnerability at the center of their powerlessness" and assumes that economic empowerment positively impacts various aspects of women's existence. Its strategies are built around strengthening women's position as workers through organizing and providing them with access to support services. Though this approach improves women's economic position, she notes that it is unclear that this change necessarily empowers them in other dimensions of their lives.
Batliwala argues that the consciousness-raising and organizing empowerment approach is based on a complex understanding of gender relations and women's status. This method ascribes women's powerlessness to the ideology and practice of patriarchy and socio-economic inequality. Strategies focus on organizing women to recognize and challenge gender-and class-based discrimination in all aspects of their lives. However, she posits that though successful in enabling women to address their strategic needs, this approach may not be as effective in assisting them to meet their immediate or practical needs.

Like Antrobus, Batliwala argues that empowerment strategies must intervene at the level of "women's condition while also transforming their position", thus simultaneously addressing both practical and strategic needs. However, it is important to note that there is a subtle change in the language that Batliwala uses to describe "women's condition".59

In the 1980s Third World Feminists and their allies tended to speak about "women's subordination" however, the public discourse shifts to "women's powerlessness". Sen, writing both alone and with Batliwala, also uses "women's powerlessness". In their paper on reproductive rights, they state that "empowerment is a process by which the powerless gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives".61 We note that a preoccupation with "women's powerlessness" may appear to be less confrontational than a focus on "women's subordination" (with its implication that someone or something is actively oppressing women) and that this may have specific strategic policy advantages. However, a focus on "women's powerlessness", conceptually positions women as either possessing or not possessing power. This interpretation is also present in the discussion of women's empowerment by other commentators.

Drawing on her experience with a development project aimed at improving the economic and social status of home-based Southeast Asian women workers through
education, training and organizing, Lazo reports on what she considers to be its empowerment aspects at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organizations (UNESCO) seminar on women, education and empowerment. This project received support from the Government of Denmark and the International Labour Organization and its principle concern was to establish an institution that could "give the women collective strength and a collective voice, in short a power base". It also sought to establish linkages with government and NGOs, so as to increase the women's access to services. Lazo notes that the immediate purpose of the project is to extend social protection to the women by increasing their piece rates and wages, reducing exploitation by, and dependence on, middleman for job orders, and providing health, housing, education and other appropriate benefits. Thus, this project was primarily concerned with addressing practical needs.

Within the context of women's empowerment, Lazo suggests that power "arises from possessing a complex combination of personal and physical resources that is being bestowed or being acquired in the process of empowerment". She states that, women's state of powerlessness is borne by a combination and interaction of environmental and personal factors. Women's powerlessness arises from their illiteracy, lack of awareness, lack of information and knowledge about markets and lack of skills, their overall lack of self-esteem and self-confidence, their lack of money, their lack of job opportunities They remain in a state of blissful ignorance. One can move from an extreme state of absolute lack of power to the other extreme of having absolute power.

Within the context of this analysis, the implicit assumption is that power is something that women do or do not have and that women's empowerment is a zero sum game. An alternative interpretation could be that women are constantly negotiating and renegotiating power relations, and are thus never completely powerless.

The language of empowerment was also invoked by many multilateral institutions. As we noted earlier, the President of the World Bank spoke about women's empowerment
at the FWCW. However the World Bank’s main policy documents on women and
gender in the mid 1990s do not reveal a concern with the facilitation of women’s
empowerment. The Bank’s focus is on strategies aimed at “promoting gender equality
and consequently, enhancing economic efficiency”. For example, its policy report for
Beijing (1995) presents the case for gender equality almost entirely on efficiency
grounds, “persistent inequality between women and men constraints a society’s
productivity and, ultimately slows its rate of economic growth”.

This sentiment is consistent with opinions expressed in its publication on women’s
participation in economic development (1994), World-wide experience shows clearly
that supporting a stronger role for women contributes to economic growth, improves
child survival and overall family health, and reduces fertility, thus, helping to slow
population growth rates.

The Bank’s focus has been on expanding women’s productivity in agriculture,
opening labour markets to them, and improving their access to family planning, health
care and education. The World Bank argues that this strategy will facilitate an increase
in “women’s social status and eventually equalize it with that of men”, thus, facilitating
national economic development. However, as Elson argues, the assumption that
women’s problem is their exclusion from economic activities forecloses discussions,
and the formulation, of policies to address the problematic aspects of the ways in
which many women participate in the market economy.

The United Nations Fund for Women (UNIFEM), played an important role
supporting women in their preparations for, and during, the Beijing Conference and
the NGO Forum, and “came away with a strengthened mandate to support women’s
economic and political empowerment.” Marilyn Carr, UNIFEM’s Economic
Empowerment Advisor, worked with women in South Asia to examine the “linkages
between economic and political empowerment as well as the most appropriate strategies
for promoting women’s overall empowerment”. They focussed on different approaches
to women’s empowerment, as implemented by specific NGOs and women’s organisations.
Carr and her co-editors argue that “any strategy which aims to deal with the empowerment of the poor, and with women’s empowerment in particular, must be based on an understanding of, and ability to overcome, the causes of the lack of power which lie behind it.” According to Carr, et al. the case studies reveal that despite the concrete differences in women’s lives “they face unequal power relations in virtually all their day-to-day interactions”. They note that the “lack of power of low-income women in south Asia arises from a conjunction of two primary systems of stratification - class and gender which interact with and mutually reinforce, one another through local social, political and economic institutions”. Carr, et al. argue that it is necessary to concretize and contextualise women’s everyday realities.68

If empowerment is the ability to exercise power, then everyday forms of women’s empowerment are the ability of women to exercise power in the social institutions that govern their daily lives; the household and extended family; local community councils and associations; local elite; local markets and local government.69

They discuss three approaches for understanding “women’s powerlessness”, distinguishing between:

(i) a focus on “patriarchy as an overarching gender or (kinship) system which determines women’s roles and relationships”;

(ii) a focus on a “single (or primary) domain of women’s powerlessness, the most common being the household or the workplace, giving rise to a prioritizing of women’s reproductive or productive roles respectively”; and

(iii) locating the process of women’s “subordination or powerlessness in multiple domains (either simultaneously or sequentially)”. However, Carr, et al. note that implicit in these approaches is an assumption that “women experience powerlessness in (and through) the interaction of multiple social, political and economic institutions (not just the household)”. They also underline that the economics is not outside the political.
Women's empowerment advocates understand “women's concerns as issues of economic and social rights - the right to a livelihood and to determine one's future”, and thus, aim to enable the personal and community empowerment of poor women. They posit that “organisations concerned with women's empowerment have learned that empowerment can only happen if special attention is given to women's needs, at least until such time as they are more able to hold their own within their family and community structures.” Within this context, they highlight the importance of women's organisations and organizing for women's empowerment. They illustrate different ways in which organizing has enabled women in South Asia, through organisations including BRAC and SEWA, to pool resources in order to acquire credit, training, health and child care for productive purposes. In addition, women's organisations have enabled women to gain access to markets, bargain for increased wages, and advocate for changes in laws and macroeconomic policies. At a personal level women also gain confidence.

Carr et al. present several empowerment strategies undertaken in South Asia. These strategies are listed under the following headings:

(i) financial intervention strategies which aim to increase women's access to credit;

(ii) enterprise development strategies which facilitate women's increased access to credit; skill/business/management training and improved technologies/production packages;

(iii) marketing strategies which seek to ensure markets for products produced by women, and increase their knowledge about markets.

(iv) bargaining strategies which organize women to struggle for higher wages, better working conditions and job security; and

(v) socio-political strategies which are based on the assumption that a major set of constraints to women's economic empowerment lies in well-entrenched customs and mores, such as traditional religious and cultural attitudes towards women and power relationships between the family and larger community, all of which aim to maintain the subordinate position of women.
Legal barriers and adverse policy measures are also cited as socio-political constraints faced by women. Within this context, Carr et al. highlights that to facilitate women's empowerment, individual and collective strategies are necessary for "personal power (from within)" and "collective power (from solidarity with other women or men)".

UNIFEM, in its guidelines on women's empowerment, interprets empowerment as a "process where women, individually and collectively, become aware of how power relations operate in their lives and gain the self-confidence and strength to challenge gender inequalities at the household, community, national, regional and international levels". Four components of women's empowerment are identified.

i. acquiring knowledge and an understanding of gender/power relations and ways in which these relations may be changed.

ii. developing a sense of self-worth, a belief in one's ability to secure desired changes and the right to control one's life;

iii. gaining the ability to generate choices and thereby acquiring leverage and bargaining power; and

iv. developing the ability to organize and/or influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally.

More recently, the empowerment projects of many development agencies have been preoccupied with the expansion of individual choices and capacities for self-reliance, especially through microfinance projects, which, for the most part, do not promote a feminist approach to women's empowerment. These projects focus on women in isolation, rather than on gender or class relations, and emphasize individual changes in attitudes to achievement and self-confidence, rather than structural changes.

Mayoux, in her examination of women's empowerment within the context of micro-finance projects, notes that women's empowerment has been a primary aim of
many such schemes: However, she argues, “where women have been targeted the
main debates have been about access, with contributions to empowerment then
assumed”.73

Oxaal and Baden define women’s empowerment “as a process whereby women,
individually and collectively, become aware of how power relations operate in their
lives and gain the self-confidence and strength to challenge gender inequalities”. They
argue that the increased popularity of the empowerment concept “mirrors the shift
away for top-down planning towards more participatory forms of development and
moves by donor agencies to embrace NGOs as partners in development”. However,
Oxaal and Baden note, “tensions exist between agencies’ declared aims of
empowerment and the way organisations operate in practice”.74

Women’s advocates have emphasized that empowerment cannot be done from
the outside, “it is something women need to do for themselves”75. Thus, it is misleading
to assume that governments or other external agents can empower women. To do so
“can quickly lead to view of empowerment as another welfare handout”. Gurumurthy,
in her paper on women’s rights and status, published by UNDP, makes a useful
distinction between:

i. empowerment that is an externally induced process (set in motion by different
social actors), involving the creation of conditions that enable women to exercise their
autonomy; and

ii. self-empowerment, a process “where women find a time and space of their
own to begin to re-examine their lives critically and collectively”.
She states that “while the former process denotes the removal of barriers to, as well as the facilitation of, women's access to and control over resources, the latter emphasizes women's agency in seeking higher levels of access and control”.

Thus, at the end of the 1990s, discourses on women's empowerment are, for the most part, engaged in with a neo-liberal preoccupation with the promotion of strategies aimed at empowering individual women to achieve control over their lives through participation in markets, in isolation from interrogating ways in which institutions and ideologies constitute women's and men's social, economic and political positions and gender relations.

The process of empowerment is not sectoral - it encompasses women's multiple roles and interests, and addresses the inter-relationships between them, leading to women gaining greater control over their own lives. Empowerment thus, has many dimensions.

* Building a critical understanding of the causes and processes of disempowerment.
* Enhancing self-esteem and altering self-image.
* Gaining increased access to natural, financial and intellectual resources.
* Acquiring the confidence, knowledge, information and skills to understand and intervene in social, economic and political structures and processes.
* Increasing participation in and control of decision-making processes within and outside the family and community.
* Moving into new roles and spaces, which were hitherto seen as exclusively male domains.

The process of women's empowerment challenges the basic assumptions which govern age-old social institutions, systems and values. It is, therefore, inevitable that it should encounter resistance from existing power structures. It is easier for collectives of women, rather than an individual woman, to take the process of empowerment forward in the face of this resistance. Development efforts in the last forty years
have by and large not addressed the root causes of women's subordination, and have therefore failed to impact gender inequality in a significant way. Most mainstream approaches to women's development have not been based on analyses of the overall reality of women's lives, but have focussed either on their roles as mothers, housewives or as economic agents. The development of women was seen as an issue of "letting them participate" in projects which they were not involved in determining, on terms decided by others. The emphasis later shifted to targeting women through separate women-only projects. While many of these were innovative and catalytic, most were small, isolated and under-funded initiatives which had very little lasting impact. Where women's components have been included in large mainstream projects, the objectives and priorities of these projects were seldom influenced or informed by women's needs and concerns.

It is now widely accepted that gender inequality is not a result of women's integration or lack of integration in development, or their lack of skills, credit and resources. The root cause of the problem lies in the social structures, institutions, values and beliefs which create and perpetuate women's subordination. The issue is not merely one of "adding on" women to various processes, but of reshaping these processes to create the space for women's involvement not only in implementing the development agenda, but also in agenda-setting. The global crisis of rapidly increasing ecological degradation and poverty in the 1990s led to a growing acceptance of the critiques of the dominant ideology and conceptual framework of development by people's movements and NGOs in both the South and the North. Dominant models of industry based and export led economic growth are now acknowledged to have resulted in large scale exploitation of both natural and human resources. Women have been the worst affected. Women's work and the environment have been compared to invisible "subsidies which support all societies. Both are undervalued or perceived as free even as others continue to profit from them".
A major cause for this crisis of development is the dominant world view which sees only polarised realities - which marginalises and renders invisible not only women's realities, but also the realities and priorities of all powerless groups - the poor, children, tribal communities and the oppressed castes. The need is, therefore, to move from integrating women into existing development approaches giving them “a larger slice of the poisoned pie” - to a framework of equitable and sustainable development. This involves reshaping development to reflect the visions, interests and needs of those who have been rendered invisible and powerless by mainstream processes. Women and the poor together form the majority of the world’s population. The perspectives and experiences of poor women can be a major source of transformation of the way in which we understand development. Gender mainstreaming is, therefore, a strategy for addressing and reversing the current global crisis of development.

Thus, a wide range of theoretical views have come down to us, on the concept of empowerment of women. Most of them attribute disempowerment of women to their subjugation to men, in the male dominated society, and their economic dependence on men. As a consequence, women suffered from inequality and lack of self confidence. Feminists, peoples' movements and NGOs have addressed this issue in relation to muslim women. They have analysed the background for such a state of affairs which is discussed in the next chapter.
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