UNIT 16 WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT : SOME ILLUSTRATIONS

Structure

16.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you should be able to:

- discuss the meaning and definition of women's empowerment;
- elaborate reasons for women's powerlessness;
- discuss various approaches for empowering women; and
- give illustrations.

16.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we shall discuss on "women's empowerment". It begins with the definition and meaning of the term "women's empowerment". Then the different reasons for women's powerlessness are discussed. The main reasons are patriarchy, and the focus on women's reproductive role. Thus women experience powerlessness in multiple social political and economic institutions. After that the various approaches for empowering women are discussed followed through illustrations where in women have been empowered by various women's organizations like SEWA and Proshika.

16.2 MEANING AND DEFINITION

The dictionary meaning of the terms "empowerment" is to give power or authority. Hence empowerment is the act of giving power. Thus women's empowerment is the act of empowering women i.e. to give them the power or authority. Empowerment is not necessarily only at the work place or at home. But in general it means the control which women have over all the resources. The term empowerment has different meanings to women of different classes. Any pogramme which aims to deal with empowerment of poor, and with women's empowerment in particular, must begin with an understanding of and the causes for the lack of power. It can only then development strategies on how to overcome these. While the logic behind this is clear, and the term "empowerment" is now in widespread use in development circles, it is still a relatively recent development concept

and remains relatively under defined. In the following sections we shall discuss the reason for the lack of power and then explain the strategies.

16.3 REASONS FOR WOMEN'S POWERLESSNESS

A central question that theorists interested in empowerment seek to answer is: What are the causes of subordination or oppression of a specific powerless group (e.g.) women)?

One approach to thinking about women's powerlessness focuses on patriarchy as an overarching gender (or kinship) system which determines women's roles and relationships. In a male dominated patriarchal society, women are viewed in their traditional social roles which are subordinate to men. If a women wishes to be accepted as a woman she should not be too competent, over ambitious, dominating and devoid of femininity.

Another approach focuses on a single (or primary) domain of women's powerlessness, the most common being the household, giving rise to a focus on women's reproductive or productive roles respectively. (viz. the role of women as child bearers and housewives)

In Indian families girls are expected to assume responsibility for housework at a relatively early age. Even in ordinary circumstances the role expectation of girls is that they share the housekeeping chores like cooking and rearing of children along with mothers. Hence such societies assume that women are meant to work in the home and be totally dependent on the menfolk.

A third approach assumes that women experience sub-ordination or powerlessness in multiple domains (either simultaneously or sequentially). These include the home, at work, and all other places. At home a woman is expected to conform to the traditional ideal of a hard working woman ready to subjugate her own interests to the happiness of others in the family and demanding nothing in return. At the work place too, she must not be too competent in her job. If she wants to do her job to her satisfaction she faces the prospect of being resented. The reasons for this sub-ordination is that differences between a male and female child are made right from childhood and a girl is socialized to be submissive and passive.

The various approaches though distinct in many regards all assume that women experience powerlessness in (and through interaction of) multiple social, political and economic institutions (not just the household).

16.4 EMPOWERING WOMEN

The central challenge the practitioners interested in empowering women seeks to address is: how best to overcome or transform the causes of sub-ordination or oppression of women.

16.4.1 Srilatha Batliwala's Study of Empowerment of Women in South Asia

In her study on the empowerment of women in South Asia, Srilatha Batliwala distinguishes between three different non-government organizations (NGO) approaches. The integrated development approach, the economic approach and the consciousness raising cum research and resource agency approach – adopted by some NGOs which do not directly operate at the grass roots level.

According to Batliwala there are two types of empowerment

a)   Economic Empowerment

b)   Total Empowerment

The Government and various agencies feel that by providing various resources i.e. through integrated rural development programmes or entrepreneurial development programmes women can be empowered. But economic empowerment does not always lead to total empowerment or enhanced status. Some of the women belonging to affluent families may have the resources but have no decision making rights in their families and thus are not empowered. Thus lack of resources is not the causes of dis-empowerment but it is the result of dis-empowerment. The causes are historical factors like low status of women,

male dominated society etc. therefore only economic empowerment may not result in total empowerment i.e. a woman may become economically independent but still she may not have decision making power in her family and her husband or father may control the household.

As Batliwala also observes – the distinctions between these approaches can only be made conceptually. In practice, these distinctions often get blurred. Most development programmes combine some mix of these approaches. Under Batliwala's typology the experiences documented here would be classified as integrated rural development or economic approaches. However, all of them build upon an initial underlying base of consciousness – raising and organizing. And all of them explicitly or implicitly attribute women's disempowerment to multiple factors and not any single factor.

16.4.2 Sydney Schuler and Syed Hashemi's Study on Empowerment of Women in Rural Bangladesh

In their study on empowerment of women in rural Bangladesh, Sydney Schuler and Syed Hashemi focus on empowerment as experienced by women members of Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and Grameen Bank, both of which have been characterized as adopting individuals economic approaches. According to them there are six specific components to female empowerment in Bangladesh namely–

1) a sense of self and vision of a future
2) mobility and visibility
3) economic security
4) status and decision making power within the household
5) ability to interact effectively in the public sphere
6) participation in non-family groups

Among the examples of collective empowerment and action they report cases of women's groups taking action against the husbands of group members who beat or divorce their wives, or women groups fielding their own candidates and voting with their own minds in local elections.

Even these individuals economic approaches can have collective political effects.

Education of women is an important route to empowerment
Courtesy: Kiranmayi Bushi

16.4.3 Leslie Calman's Study of Women's Movement in India

Leslie Calman in her study of women's movement in India sees two major ideological and organizational tendencies within the movements.

i) Large urban-based - which focuses on issues of rights and equality

ii) Both rural and urban based which emphasizes empowerment and liberation.

According to Calman women's rights advocates, see women's concerns as issues of civil and political rights i.e. the aim for equality under the law. The women's empowerment advocates on the hand, see women's concerns as issues of economic and social rights i.e. the right to a livelihood and to determine one's future and aim at the personal and community empowerment of poor women.

The first step in organizing for empowerment is to get groups of women to analyse their common problems and then collectively to seek solutions. Under Calman's classification SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) is a leading example of a empowerment organization, even 'Proshika' would be classified as an empowerment organization by Calman.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: Compare your answer with one at the end of the unit.

1) Say True or False

    a) Women experience powerlessness only in economic institutions.

    b) One approach to thinking about women's powerlessness focuses on patriarchy.

    c) The term empowerment is a relatively development concept and is underdefined.

2) Fill in the Blanks:

    a) .... studies women's movement in India

    b) The main reasons for women's powerlessness are .... and the focus on women's .... role.

    c) .... is a leading example of an empowerment organization under Calman's classification.

16.5 EMPOWERMENT: CASE STUDIES

We now turn to some case studies to Illustrate our arguments in this unit.

16.5.1 Case Study I

Proshika's Approach to Economic Empowerment of Women

Proshika was one of the first organizations in Bangladesh to build organizations of the poor. Proshika views the empowerment of women as crucial to the development process in Bangladesh. National problems of poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition, low productivity and unemployment are directly linked with the denial of rights and opportunities to women. Women group members benefit from Proshika's training courses. Human development training courses are designed to enable women to understand and identify the problems they face as poor women and to development strategies for tackling these problems. One objective of these courses is to empower women to raise their collective voices against practices such as dowry, wife battering, divorce under false grounds and unequal wages. Since poor women typically have had little opportunity to take leadership or management positions, the courses also enable women to acquire the skills necessary to take these positions in women's groups, and in their communities.

Proshika's views women's income generation is a starting point for women's empowerment. By making a contribution to family income, women begin to gain the power to make decisions within the family. With the ability to earn women gain the means for survival and self reliance. Proshika encourages women to undertake productive activities outside the home which help alter the gender division of labour and create opportunities for women to acquire new skills as well as to use new and higher technologies.

Proshika's approach to economic empowerment is well illustrated by growth and development of Jamuna and Lucky Mohila Samities.

16.5.2   Protecting the Forests

In Paikpara, forest depletion is a serious problem which has been perpetuated by the local elite who have been engaged in cutting and uprooting trees for profit. Most land in Paikpara is government reserved forest and administered by the local Forest Department and the actions of the elite have been unofficially sanctioned by some corrupt Forest Department staff.

From their personal experiences and through Proshika's training on environmental substainability and regeneration, members of the Jamuna Mohila Samiti realised that depletion of the forest was not only a serious threat to the environment but also to their livelihoods. In their parents' lifetimes, many types of fruit bearing trees, vegetables and wild fowl were found in the forest. There was no longer such an abundance of wildlife, trees and plants and the forest mostly contained "Sal Trees". Women used the fallen branches and leaves of these trees for fuel but recognised that even this use of the forest was threatened by illegal tree felling. Not long after forming their group, the women decided to take action to protect the forests from further destruction.

In 1990, women members of Jamuna Mohila Samiti guarding the forest in shifts, despite the dishonour that inevitably follows women who challenge purdah and are publicly mobile and visible. Religious leaders, village elders and local government officials all opposed the women's presence in the forests and their open disregard for purdah and used means of intimidation to inhibit the women from continuing their actions. To some degree the grounds for this opposition were a pretext: the elite realised that they could no longer cut and uproot trees as easily and heedlessly as they had done before. They also recognised that the dependency of poor women on their wealthier neighbours had been eroded by the groups activities. Once the women began their group work, they less frequently needed to work as domestic labourers in the rich households because they had other income generating activities. Women group members no longer needed high interest loans from the rich moneylenders because they could get low interest credit from Proshika.

However, in the early period of women's forest protection activities, the village elite too had the opportunity to strike back. They cut the trees that had grown quite tall under the women's protection and battered some Paikpara women who confronted them. After this incident, Paikpara women and men alike, with residents from nearby villages, mobilized a signature compaign followed by a rally of about 2000 people, including journalists, to protest the forests' destruction. They made it clear that they would rather die than stop protecting the forests.

Although the elite convinced some local forest officials to register false cases against some Paikpara women and men, these cases were eventually withdrawn. The rally drove the women's point home and they faced fewer problems from the elite, as well as other interest groups, since then the women continue to maintain and protect the forest.

With the assistance of Proshika, women are in the process of negotiating benefit sharing with the government. They have proposed a scheme under which they (and other groups) would receive 40 percent of the profits from wood cut during forest maintenance. Since groups in the community will assist the Forest Department with this maintenance, they will have a further incentive to protect the forest. Although it has been a long and drawn out process, Proshika staff feel an agreement may be forthcoming. The women are also negotiating with the government for Khas land (Government state owned land) on which to build houses, since many Paikpara residents are landless.

16.5.3   Empowerment Case Study II

Empowering Marginalized Workers: Unionzation of Tobacoo workers by the Self-Employed Women's Association in Kheda, Gujarat.

This study focuses on the unionization process and the consequent economic and social change among female tobacoo workers in Kheda District, Gujarat. The self employed Women's Association (SEWA) begain its trade union activities in Kheda District in 1986 and has since become the major trade union in the district. Its total membership in the district at the end of 1994 was 14500. The main strength in SEWA's organization lies in

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its ability to link up pure trade union activity of bargaining for higher wages with social security such as child care, health, savings, insurance with employment promotion measures, SEWA's efforts in Kheda District are a striking example of what women can achieve through combined actions leading to empowerment.

Kheda District is one of the richest districts in Gujarat state. However, it is also a district of great inequities. Alongside wealthy milk producers, cotton and tobacoo growers and tobacoo factory owners live impoverished and exploited workers who make up the majority of the district's population. Workers were supposed to receive Gujarat's agricultural minimum wage, but they would receive half the amount as they have no union to protect them. Women worked long hours beating tobacoo leaves, feeding leaves into machines and packing tobacoo into sacks. They conducted these tasks, which often involved lifting large quantities of tobacoo, while breathing in a thick pallor of tobacoo dust. Women suffered from respiratory problems, in addition to physical fatigue and back ailments from working in these harsh conditions.

Women from overwhelming majority of workers in the unorganized informal sector but most trade unions operating are gender neutral (not specific to women). SEWA however lays greater stress to women's problems through a wholistic approach . It regards women not only as an individual entity but as a member of composite family group. In Kheda these activities include organizing creches, saving groups, insurance, health, DWCRA groups etc.

Any other union first tries to enter a new area by framing charter of demands, registering a few members and placing demands before the employers. Such a strategy is justified for union created for economic gains.

SEWA on the other hand begins its activities by conducting a socio economic survey of the area. This survey is conducted to give the organizers an idea of the problems that women face. The next step is making them aware of these problems and their likely solutions. Women learning legal rights through worker's education programmes conducted by the organizers. These programmes aim to educate women so that they and not the organizers can decide on appropriate courses of action. Although this is a longer process than that adopted by most other trade unions, it attempts to initiate action from the workers themselves than depending on the outside.

When Indiraben (from Chikodera Village in Kheda) started conducting worker's education classes in the villages, she got very little response. The women were afraid that if they participated in the classes, their employers would find out and victimize them. Many of them were cynical of such efforts because they felt that even if they become aware of their rights, they could never confront their employers with their demands as they would lose their work. The women also lacked the confidence to face the landlords and factory owners. Thus low wages, low social status coupled with the fact they were women made them helpless and unorganized.

Earlier attempts by trade unions in unionizing tobacoo workers were directed towards males. It therefore, became extremely difficult to attract women into trade unions.

Some of the women present did not get work. They had worked in a factory for several years, but seventeen of them lost their work because they had complained to the Labour Department that the factory workers were not given minimum wages. This had happened three years ago and they had remained unemployed since then. This incident had also scared the other workers.

SEWA initiated trade union activities on 1986 by conducting education classes. Women slowly became aware of her legal rights like minimum wages, time, etc. They exchanged views, discussed problems and realised the value of collective strength.

Under DWCRA (Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas) the women formed groups and took up some income generating activity. SEWA encouraged them to start savings groups so that they did not have to depend on employers and thus overcome borrowing problems. SEWA's health scheme or the health worker's cooperatives created awareness of health and hygiene and provided cheap medicines. The strength of SEWA as a trade union lies in its ability to link up a number of support systems to back its trade union activities. SEWA also supported the women to arrange for finance and grants. The factory owners agreed to provide space for creche and the cooperative was registered on

21st December, 1994 under the name of Shri Saishav Mahila Bal Sewa Sahakari Mandal. One of the othe support programmes in the collaboration with GIC in the insurance scheme for the poor. SEWA has been trying to improve opportunities for next generation viz. girls. The main point to note here is that women are now drawing strength from the collective. They now have a sense of confidence and can now sit on a chair rather than the floor.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Why does Proshika view women's income generation as a starting point for women's empowerment? Answer in about five lines.

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2) Why was it difficult to attract women into trade unions in Kheda? Answer in about five lines.

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16.6   LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have defined the terms empowerment and also seen what women's empowerment mean. We have discussed various reasons for women's powerlessness and also the ways to overcome or transform the causes of sub-ordination or oppression of women. Lastly, we have discussed the case studies of women's organizations like Proshika and SEWA which have helped to empower women.

16.7   KEY WORDS

Empowerment   :   To give power or authority

Patriarchal Society   :   The society where in complete family authority resides in the husband or father of other male members.

Mobility, Social   :   The movement of an individual or group from one social class or social stratum to another.

16.8   FURTHER READINGS

Marilyan Carr, Martha Chen, Renana Jhabrala (ed.) 1996. *Speaking Out: Economic Empowerment of Women in South Asia*. New Delhi, Sage (India) Publications.

16.9   SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1) a)   False
   b)   True
   c)   True

2) a)   Leslie Calman
   b)   Patriarchy, reproductive
   c)   SEWA

Check Your Progress 2

1)   Proshika views women income generation as a starting point for women's empowerment because by making a contribution to family income, women begin to gain the power to make decisions within the family. She also gains the means for survival and self reliance. Productive activities outside the home help alter the gender division of labour and create opportunities for women to acquire new skills and to use new and higher technologies.

2)   It was extremely difficult to attract women into trade unions because all the earlier attempts made by the trade unions in unionizing tobacco workers were directed towards males. Some the women who complained to the labour department that they were not given minimum wages had lost their jobs and remained unemployed since then. This incident scared the other workers.