

## Women Empowerment : Reality or Myth

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Are women really empowered ? Seems to be the question of the decade as this decade saw the rise of many women and the fight for equality seemed to dim in the face of the new empowered female citizens of our nation, state, family. But like a day that has its dawn bright and clear has its dusk as well, the dawn of the empowered women had a stronghold that seemed to slacken in the dusk. As the female populace is still facing barriers in the society in every sphere and this barrier strengthens its vice like grip through many forms of violence, atrocities and inequality against women.

The term Empowerment holds different meanings to different psyches and this divergence, this comprehension of facts against fiction, this way of interpretation that people of various sects, associations and understanding can perhaps answer this quintessential question—ARE WOMEN REALLY EMPOWERED ?

Smt. Rituparna Mohanty a social activist feels there are three types of empowerment-political, social and financial. In Indian perspectives if a state have 3 women Chief Ministers or there is only 33 percent reservation do we have political empowerment as women ? We do not. Is the system woman friendly in every sphere ? It is not the right empowerment that

women should have. Women have to be given due respect in a society to have actual empowerment. When women are developed socially we I believe become more vulnerable. As developed or recognized women are actually exploited. To empower women financially a lot of initiatives have been undertaken at national and state level like introduction of SHG a plethora of welfare measures but only spending money is not enough to financially empower women. Basic skills and training should be given for the proper utilization of the finances. As unskilled and semi-literate women are exploited everywhere. But the society having developed is still not safe for its female citizens. A woman's safety is not only her family's responsibility but the states as well. Despite my dangerous work I do not feel afraid but a woman's safety is always threatened. Today the incidence of rape and torture on women is taking precedence so if we are not safe how we can dream of being empowered. The evils of dowry and dowry related deaths is still being reported but it is not plausible for a young girl to remain unmarried to avoid dowry, the younger generation needs to take a stand. I did not support or practice dowry and I took a stand that who ever marries me has to respect my work as well, then only things can work out, one has to take a stand. And girls and their parents need to have a little patience in dealing with the mother in law

situation. A woman has to manage and then she can rule her household. If this situation can be managed then the divorce rates will also go down. As the friction between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is a primary cause for divorce and family disturbance even violence. Women in our society have no control over their sexuality as the incidences of marital rape is very visible in our society, and a woman's desire is not at all considered by her husband. Women even have no authority over her reproductive lives but the decision is seen to be fifty-fifty among educated masses and the importance the woman has within her family.

Women can be empowered only if they are given education and made aware of their rights and hence they themselves prioritise their lives. Violence has to be completely eradicated from her life, then and only then can the dream of empowerment becomes a reality.

Mrs. Padmavati Tripathy is an educated, self-sufficient, empowered woman. Her life is every Indian woman's dream as she has fulfilled her dream of reaching heights in her education and career, has a wonderful family, her children are grown-up and lead successful lives and she is behind the greater success of her husband –the Vice-chancellor of Ravenshaw University, one of the prestigious educational institution in the nation. Her brilliance shines forth in every answer she gives and whether questions regarding empowerment is valid here is a question for consideration as she clearly seems empowered and is also at complete ease with her empowered status. To her empowerment means authority and an acceptance of what one is doing without any hesitation and fear. But is she really empowered? Even today I ask my husband before any thing I do, I inform him of every decision I take as he is very busy and mostly out he should know what I

am doing but I do not always know what he is doing."

And not even back when I was a newly wed as my in-laws were very authoritative despite our background of strong academics and as my husband is not very authoritative I had to adjust to my in laws way of life. I felt dominance by them and my sister-in-law, this dominance is a way of life for our daughters and daughter-in-laws in our society, whether any change has taken place in today's generation is very debatable as the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship is still one that is feared by daughters and today even mother-in-laws are fearing their daughter-in-laws as they misuse law to hurt them for very small issues as now law is quiet favorable towards the bou's which is great but it should not be misused. This relationship should be one of understanding and acceptance.

I do not feel the society is safe for women today so how are women empowered when she cannot move freely in fear of jewellery snatching, molestation, kidnapping and such atrocities against her. If the society cannot protect half of its citizens how can it empower them? Socially the status of women is not really empowered despite a huge change, as my daughters are happy and feel safe where they are but the process still has a long road ahead. Like the issue of dowry in our society is still very strong even though I did not give any dowry for my daughter as her in laws were against it but we had asked as it is a very old and widely practised institution and has very strong roots in our society, we have to compromise.

This system is very much present in our society even my relatives adhere to it and I believe education can prove instrumental in slowly eradicating it. A woman's self or persona takes a

back seat after marriage, her individuality and even sexuality is not her own but strongly influenced by her husband's choices and desires. Even her reproductive choices are not her own in some society but not everywhere. I believe women have control over their bodies and wellbeing in educated societies and has the control over the financial and social acceptance of her family as well but not always as the bigger decisions are taken by the male members of the family but usually it is a mutual affair.

I should understand that now my children are grown up and have lives of their own so they do not have much time for me even though I have done my duty towards them and I am sure they will be there for me in my need as well. And I should also understand that my husband is busy so I do not have time to talk to him even but some women instead of understanding complain too much and that leads to conflict. I believe husband and wife should talk and share problems as it as I said is a mutual affair.

Men are very vulnerable they are not strong mentally as women despite their physical strength. Women for that reason have been more tolerant and sacrificed a lot more than men. So, it does not matter whether the society has empowered them or not as they were always empowered in their psyches, eventhough their body is not fully empowered their soul has always been empowered."

Mrs. Kalyani Rout, a typical Odiya bohu, wife, mother in other words a house wife. Her whole life centers around her family and the aspirations that she had is now the dedicated upbringing of her children and the smooth running of her household. She is the perfect hostess when needed and even an entrepreneur as running a household can be equivalent to running a successful business.

So what does empowerment mean to her- well, equality between boys and girls is her *mantra*. As she believes girls are better than boys in many fields and have proven themselves in male oriented fields such as engineering and aeronautics. Times have changed and we need to change as well. The acceptance, she feels of girls into these male dominated spheres is empowerment. But despite such positive changes now a days the one thing never changes that is the fear of violence against women. We have a young girl she says and we are never comfortable regarding her safety, we don't let her go anywhere without proper safety as we let our son go. We do not restrict our son's movement as much our daughters.

Another social evil is dowry and I am strongly against it, but as I have a daughter I have to think of her future and offer it as it is our social system. Dowry is the main reason for son preference in our society and hence the practice of female infanticide and foeticide is so widely seen even among educated masses. Our daughters are not safe among people who take dowry as they are obviously greedy and would want more and torture our daughters. Although I was one of the lucky few to have shared a very good relationship with my mother-in-law. But not everyone is so lucky.

Women always face physical as well as mental trauma in all the aspects of her life from forced reproduction for male child to use of contraceptive which she is bound to undergo. The male gender are too precious for any difficulties and pain, it seems. Women have always been suppressed, underestimated and valued less in the society and also within her family. This is changing but not fast enough. In every family women are made to sacrifice for their household and give up their desires, wants less priority than her husband's wishes. Even in educated families women eventhough seem to run the household and be

the main force behind the running of a household, have in reality no decision making power, as I do nothing unless I ask my husband or I might want something but his views differ and ultimately his word is kept.

He is after all the man of the family and I am a woman eventhough we are supposed to be equal partners, reality is not always what it seems.

Prof. Tapati Das, Principal, Rama Devi Women's College believes empowerment is the power of choice and voice, if she can choose and then voice it a woman is empowered. The financial freedom is also an important aspect which should be ingrained in the process of empowerment. I don't feel women have fully achieved their status in this society as male dominance is strongly felt in every sphere and women have to put double efforts to stand behind their decisions. The society is not as safe as it should be for women eventhough it is much better.

Women are unsafe because they are physically weak but they are mentally very strong even in mythology women are viewed as stronger beings but gender has always been a criteria for violence in any given society. I feel I am in charge and control over my life and I can influence others and I also see that my decision is carried out as I have the economic and social status. I deserve as a woman. The status of women is often in a derogatory state as women are even today subjected to social evils such as dowry. Even though in theory we are raising our voice against dowry but in practice it is very much their.

Women are also at times the culprit as they themselves succumb to giving and taking dowry because of status and as everyone else is also practising it. Mothers want better grooms for daughters so they instead of fighting dowry succumb to it. It is socially and culturally infused

in us and is indeed taking time to be eradicated. Another social institution i.e. marriage is at times in shambles because of the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship. And the problem arises as they are from different backgrounds and they both demand equal attention from the husband/son. All the problems can be overcome if the word mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are replaced with only mother and daughter.

I have a good relationship with my mother-in-law but not always but we are educated people and can keep things from escalating into major issues. Eventhough I have a nucleus family I know my mother-in-law is there for me when I need her and vice versa. Women to be empowered need to be in control of her reproductive life and her sexuality as well and I believe today a woman is in control but as sex is a taboo topic in our society she isn't vocal about it even to her husband. There is always a misunderstanding that issues like sexuality and sex will be misunderstood and the woman might be treated as overly smart or worse. But changes are gradually taking place and sex education and counseling should be encouraged in marriageable young women and men as well. Even the reproductive life is not absolutely in control of the woman especially if the first child is a girl she is forced to have another child as the preference for son is still seen in our society and in every culture especially in our nation. Even in the use of contraception women are forced to undergo contraceptive measure which is often harmful to them and causes obesity and other ailments but due to the male ego and a very patriarchal dominance women are always at the receiving end of every injury.

In a postmortem report it was found that 70-80 per cent women have undergone surgery to avoid pregnancy in comparison to only 15

percent men. In order to be fully empowered in our society women shouldn't be suppressed. She has been suppressed for a long time it is time to take care of her. A redefinition of feminine and masculine roles is needed.

An aspiring student Meenakshi Murmu of Women's Studies, Ravenshaw University believes that she is empowered even though it was a slow process. Her career decisions have reflected this fact as her parents especially her mother has encouraged her to study further despite the pressure from her tribal society to marry at an earlier age.

She feels that her mother is trying to live her own dreams through her. As her generation was not as encouraging as her daughter's generation. Empowerment to this young woman means the opportunity, the freedom and scope that are bestowed on her to achieve the career, the partner and the life of her choice. She is even given the option to marry an intercast person despite the rigid social system of the tribal community that discourages inter-cast marriages strongly, her parents rather see her happy she says than force me into submission because I am a girl. But not every tribal girl or any young girl is given this choice in life that easily. It is she believes the sugar coated way of advice from parents to tell them everything and not take any rash decisions.

But freedom is misutilised by many of this generation's boys and girls they do what they like and misuse the society and social values. She believes that she can sacrifice the career she is fighting so hard to have a family as family and children should not be sacrificed because of one's desire to excel in life, if one can strike a balance then its o.k. if not it is better to have a family than a career at the end of my days. Dowry is a social

evil she feels that is very much present in her generation as well and she sees her parents and the parents of her friends worry constantly regarding it but she would rather stay unmarried than succumb to dowry. Even though she feels the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is not something to worry about much in today's nucleus family situation and that any thing can be sorted out if one tries, and although she has heard many horror stories regarding the evils of this *badnam* relationship she does not fear the prospects of a mother-in-law.

This self proclaimed empowered young woman feels that in terms of violence the status of woman was and is the same no matter how empowered one is or how modern the society is. As the fear of rape and molestations is still the most primary fear of any girl or parents. And the advices of parents are the same now as they were a decade back — be careful against these types of physical abuse, do not go out after dark, do not travel alone this young empowered woman after giving this statement stops and re-evaluates how empowered she really is.

Miss Rashmita Das a young educated working woman feels she is as empowered as any man. I can do anything today she says and this resilience, this self assuredness has come from self determination and of course awareness through education. I have always been treated as an equal in my family along with my brothers In terms of education, traveling by myself, my job and even selecting my own partner. Although I never had it as easy as my brothers but I had it nevertheless.

Boys are born with a silver spoon in their mouth; girls have to fight for one but anything can be achieved in today's world through proper

awareness and yes education. In yester years it was not that easy like my mother was not even aware of her own rights in the society as I am now.

But safety in today's world can be very hard to get, it depends on ones life style. I will not feel safe if I am by myself outside after a certain time. If a woman is careful then she can avoid getting into trouble. The incidences of molestation and rape if anything has gone up in today's fast paced world where women are more exposed publicly than before. The law enforcement agencies have to be more dependable and authoritative. Even after marriage a girl is not safe due to dowry and marital torture. So a girl has to say no to dowry as by giving dowry the problem will not go away but intensify for the need for more. I would rather stay unmarried than give dowry, but my family might not feel the same. After marriage I will worry about one more issue that is the relationship with my mother-in-law. I believe I can adjust to somethings but not every thing will go her way, I am also an individual and I have choices of my own. I am willing to sacrifice but not everything. I am sure she will understand as she might have faced the same problems as we are now. I want to ' have priority in my husband's life after marriage but from what I have heard that is not always the case. A woman's sexuality is never discussed in any relationship no matter how loving. Women are I feel not given much priority in that since, but things are changing and people are becoming more accepting to a woman's need. I also feel this pressure to have boy children and the cases of female foeticide is a major concern after marriage but I will definitely make my health and decision a priority in my reproductive life.

Every woman should have the ability to achieve the empowered status that is rightly hers and any barriers set up by the society can be taken out by understanding if not by force.

P.Laxmi a household laborer is too busy earning a livelihood to even be aware of a term like empowerment and is blissfully unaware of the benefits she can reap if she has an empowered status in the society.

To her empowered means not being beaten up by her husband or even her nephews and brother-in-law, and being in control of her hard earned money. But when explained properly the significance of empowered status of women, she desperately wants it especially for her three daughters.

As she never had any empowerment in any aspect of her life she is too wrought up to give herself a chance at empowerment all she wants is for her daughters to enjoy the live she never had. So she is educating her younger two daughters and trying to teach them the very word which has absolutely no worth in her existence-dignity as she believes her daughters can lead a life of dignity and respect.

She fears most for their safety as she leaves them at home while working. She fears her neighbour, the ruffians outside their schools who follow them home she even fears her relatives as the evils of rape within community and family are no strangers to the below poverty line women and law is not her strongest weapon. So she constantly worries about the safety of herself and her daughters. She also hears about crimes like rape and molestations from TV and feels the society is not at all safe even for educated women. She even fears for her elder daughter who got married recently even though her in-laws are decent people but they had demanded dowry and she had succumbed by borrowing huge sums of money for this purpose. She feels she has to give dowry for all her daughters otherwise they will be tortured; Dowry is a must in their society.

Although she is not worried about her daughter's mother-in-law she had a very tough time with hers.

As her mother-in-law is very old fashioned and from the village she used to constantly beat and abuse her and as her husband is an alcoholic she had no support. She is shocked to hear that the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relation can be salvaged and be better in time as for her there is no one more vicious than her mother-in-law.

She has no support from her husband he mistreats her and physically forces her; she has no desires or happiness in her marital life. And as she has three daughters her life has been miserable ever since their birth as everyone wanted a son and despite trying three times at times of her own will to have a son and at times forcefully she never succeeded and believes herself to be cursed. To her empowerment means to have as many son's as a woman can then she is believed to be a goddess. Now after having three children she is always forced to keep trying for a son but as she can't take it anymore she secretly takes oral contraceptives.

Her life she feels cannot be empowered but if all the educated and rich people could put some more laws and plans her daughter's life can at least have a chance at empowerment.

In the light of these opinions from women of every sect, a clear vision emerges, a vision of empowerment to the very deserving ones. Even though the younger generation is far more empowered but her progress skids to a halt when cases of violence emerges.

So when one evaluates the opinion of these wonder women of our society and tries to find whether women empowerment is a myth or reality, it is not that easy as women empowerment at times seems to be an illusion that has been made into reality by some but remains uncharted territory to many. The hierarchy between men and women often disarms women as they are treated as the second position holders and perhaps an after thought of creation.

Men are perhaps the children of more powerful gods in a nation of 33 crore gods and goddesses and women are children of lesser gods.

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