

Women Empowerment: An Ethnographic Exploration

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Abstract

Empowerment is a value-laden social construct that is deep-rooted in cultural values (Noor Mohammed, 2015; Njogu and Orchardson-Mazrui, 2013). Consequently, the construct of empowerment has fuzziness in its definitions (Alkire, 2007). The definition of empowerment leads to measures in tackling hindrances in empowering people. The current article presents a qualitative exploration of the ethnic and communal scopes of empowerment for women. It is the qualitative stage of a larger study which resulted in determining the local perspective of the definition of women empowerment. This article consists of the discussions and analysis of semi-structured ethnographic interviews with 54 women from 36 districts of Punjab, Pakistan, over a year. As a consequence of this qualitative exploration new indicators of women empowerment came to light. Some previous indicators were revised in the light of local perspective while some international dimensions of empowerment appeared to be redundant in local settings. These findings support localized definitions of the diverse and complex phenomenon of women empowerment, instead of borrowed international definition. Targeted native scopes/definitions of women empowerment can assist policymakers design targeted and effective programs for empowerment and development of women.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Gender and Diversity, Methods, Ethnographic Study

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1. Introduction

Women empowerment has emerged as an important tool of the international development process. This is evident from the development strategies based on women empowerment of all prominent donor agencies, for example; ILO, UNIFEM, UNDP, ADB, etc. There exists confusion in the definition of empowerment Alkire, (2007). Where there is an understanding that empowerment is a process (Kabeer 2001, Malhotra and Schuler, 2005), it has been mostly measured as a cross-sectional parameter. Empowerment has been equated to many constructs including independence, action, authority, control; judgment buff, femininity fairness, and self-efficacy, etc. (see Malhotra, Schuler and Beonder, 2002 for discussion on sifting through terminology). Some very important factors make it almost obligatory to explore local definitions and determinants of this construct before any policies and programs are designed and implemented for the empowerment and development of women. First of all, it is the realization that empowerment is a socially and communally impacted concept, which diverges in definition due to variation in social, traditional and cultural norms (Noor Mohammed, 2015; Njogu and Orchardson-Mazrui, 2013). Secondly, both from many points of views self-efficacy is the right of every female. Application of this self-efficacy should start from defining their self-interests, and choices (Chen, 1992; G. Sen 1993, Rowlands, 1995, A. Sen 1999, Nussbaum 2000 and Kabeer, 2001). However, regrettably, that is not what is happening especially in Pakistan. Where some have tried to use participatory and exploratory approaches to define women empowerment (Schuler, Islam and Rottach (2010); Kabeer (1997); Ibrahim and Alkire (2007) and UNDP (1995), many studies have used an international tactic to define women empowerment using borrowed dimensions of empowerment. Where there is a benefit of internationally universal dimensions using studies for better comparison and increased generalizability, there is also a fear of compromising the truth embedded in in-depth analysis. We argue that as the meaning and importance of empowerment as a construct varies with the variety of cultural and social norms, therefore, there is a need to explore the definition and dimensions of empowerment for the women.

This article presents the analysis and results of a qualitative, ethnographic study carried out in all 36 districts of the most densely and diversely populated province of Punjab, Pakistan over a year (June 2015-July 2016). These results discuss how and in which dimensions women of Punjab, Pakistan see themselves empowered.

2. Methods

This article is derived from the first (qualitative) stage of the doctoral thesis where narrative inquiry and ethnographic interviews were conducted from 54 females, over a year, to study scopes of empowerment in native culture and social environment, defining empowerment using a participatory approach to give weightage to the feelings of females in a culture (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). This article used Grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 2017) to derive an innate definition of empowerment via data (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). Therefore approaches used for data gathering included contributor reflection, questioning, and observation of the environment and interactions around the participant (Corbin and Strauss, 1990).

The data gathering process in this qualitative research was done from overall Punjab with the representation of diversified areas, localities, income and age groups as possible to keep the sample representative. Field researcher spent maximum time in the homes of the participants and spent the nights in the research cities and villages during data gathering, to have informal observations of the settings. People of Punjab were very positive and responsive, nevertheless, the researcher was cautious not to influence the data gathering process in any way (Etherington, 2004; Trahar, 2011). An effort was made to convey the exact feelings of the participants without any shade of interpretations.

2.1 Sample Selection and Interview Method

The narrative inquiry technique was used for interviewing. The process began with the researcher asking some predetermined questions for excavating some initial responses and then kept on

nudging for further information until the participants' maximum cooperation. Theoretical sampling was used (Corbin and Strauss, 1990) to attain data from 54 respondents. The demographic characteristics of the sample are summarized in the following table.

2.2 Data Processing & Analysis

Interviews were recorded in the mobile phone by the researcher and later on translated and transcribed manually by the field researcher herself, to preserve the originality of the message and to avoid contamination of thoughts during translation. Some interviews proved a challenge during translation due to their philosophical ideas and terms. Experts in particular dialects of the language used were consulted before the translation of interviews. Data was then mined for dimensions and indicators by three-stage coding applied by Corbin and Strauss, 1990.

3. Results and Discussion

This article was about discovering the existence and nature of the local dimensions of women empowerment. It was also to compare these local dimensions with those of internationally accepted ones to see if there was any difference between the two sets. For this purpose following tables (Malhotra, Schuler, and Boender; 2002) were taken as a point of reference as it represented one of the most elaborate sets of dimensions used in measuring the empowerment of women internationally.

When the analysis was run following dimensions, sub-dimensions and indicators emerged. Based on the analysis, it is obvious that a major alteration existed in the dimensions of women empowerment. Schuler, Islam, and Rottach (2010) have done a study similar to this article in the sense that they revised dimensions of empowerment in a setting after 15 years. Over time there was a change in the dimensions. Some dimensions were dropped altogether, others were revised and altered and still, some new dimensions were added. However, during this study the dimensions were very different from the international dimensions, those which did overlap a little had a very different shade of perception attached to them. For example,

legal and political dimensions were dropped altogether as women of Punjab described their empowerment to individual, familial and communal levels from where they were directly impacted and till where their influence reached. Economic, socio-cultural and familial dimensions were revised, and most important ones appeared to be psychological ones, many of which were added into the definition of women empowerment.

Table 1
Sample Description

Characteristics	Classifications	Frequency
Age	15-30	3
	31-45	21
	46-60	19
	61-75	10
	>75	1
	Total	54
Marital Status	Married	38
	Unmarried	3
	Widowed	10
	Divorced	2
	Total	54
Area	Rural	32
	Urban	22
	Total	54
No. of Issues	0-2	12
	3-5	29
	6-10	13
	Total	54
Income class	Very Poor	5
	Poor	18
	Middle Income	28
	Rich	3
Occupation status	Total	54
	On job	10
	Housewives	32
	Self Employed	12
	Total	54
Education	Uneducated	19
	Under Primary	6
	Under Matric	7
	Bachelors	13
	Masters	8
	Postgraduate	1
	Total	54

Table 2
Dimensions, Sub-dimensions and Indicators of Women empowerment locally emerged

Dimensions	Sub-dimensions	Indicators
FAITH	Cognitive Spirituality	Allah's Pleasure
	Existential well-being	Purpose of Life
	Behavioral Spirituality	Religious Obligations
	Affective Expressions	Helping Needy
FAMILY SUPPORT		Religious Feeling
		Family Cohesion
		Emotional Support
		Financial support
		Putting Down
		Social Support
COMMUNITY SUPPORT		Community Cohesion
		Emotional Support
		Financial Support
		Putting Down
		Social support
PERSONAL GROOMING AND AWARENESS	Personal hygiene	Cleanliness
	Personal Appearance	Appearance
	Social Etiquettes	Social expression
		Social intelligence
	General knowledge	General knowledge
SOCIAL STANDING		Awareness
	Morals & Ethics	Integrity
		Coping up style
		Social prestige perception
		Income class perception
		Social occupation perception
PERSONAL QUALITIES	Physical Health	Prolong disease
		Dis ability
	Self Confidence	Trust inabilities
		Decision making power
		Self-Satisfaction
	Self Esteem	Good Qualities
	Ability to do things	
	Self-worth	

Positive Attitude
Dissatisfaction
Not much pride
Useless
Lack of respect
Failure

3.1 New dimensions

During narrative interviews, multiple new dimensions emerged. These dimensions have been studied by multiple researchers across different domains as crucial elements of personal strength, expression and much more, however, they have never been discussed as dimensions of empowerment.

3.2 Faith

Faith derived in this analysis as a dimension was similar to Monod et al. 2011 and Elkins et al. 1988's spirituality measure. According to MacDonald 2000, spirituality measures are multidimensional. A particular example depicted religious females as modern, educated, social and entrepreneurial. This is contrary to the common local belief that females from religious families are orthodox, they stay away from media and social networks, etc. and usually are housewives.

3.3 Family Support

When a female gets support from her immediate family members she feels strong and confident in her life. It was a communal measure instead of an individualistic empowerment concept that prevails dominantly in the west. Procidano and Kenneth (1983) defined this kind of familial support too. Both moral and financial help that the participants were getting from their families made them socially and individually more empowered as per multiple responses.

A respondent shared her life story where all her life she was supported and taken care of by her paternal relatives. Her life would probably be tougher if this family support was none existent. She, on the other hand, showed resilience in the face of multiple adversities

and yet was able to help her relatives too. These points towards her empowerment where despite low resources she managed to make lives better for others around her.

3.4 Community Support

The same kind of support earlier discussed by the immediate family was when extended to neighbors and other community members became communal support. This was also a major source of empowerment for females in Pakistan. They told the researcher that due to community support some of them were able to get back on their two feet after being widowed or facing other turmoil in life, and could set up their shops and run tiny businesses to feed themselves and even educate their children for making their future secure.

3.5 Personal Awareness & Grooming

Personal grooming and general awareness contrary to formal education appeared to be more effective in empowering women in Pakistan. As per the respondents, communal protocols (Sternberg, 2000), over-all awareness (Furnham and Tomas, 2005), morality (Jensen, 2011), relational handling (Carducci, 2009), sanitation (Rasero, 1996) and own appearance (Paasschen, 2015) were the aspects of a woman's personality that helped her more in getting empowered as compared to getting a degree only.

Multiple respondents who were themselves from underprivileged families but when they lived as workers or family members with some cultured families helped them get groomed and confident. This, in turn, empowered them to make aware decisions about their lives.

3.6 Social position

Some of the females seemed to take more than required pride and benefit from social standing. Not only did this result in over authoritative behaviors rather it also impacted the empowerment of others around them in a negative way.

During the interview, this lady treated her daughters-in-law with a snobbish attitude and repeatedly belittled her husband. She proudly told not to have lived in his '*miserable little shack*' and also of the strong financial position to be her strength. This '*over empowerment*' appeared to be the cause of the low empowerment of her family members.

Strong social standing did not bring only negative support to empowerment rather there seemed to be a direct impact of family's social standing on general confidence and freedom of choice of females. This confidence made the females strong decision-makers.

3.7 Age

Due to the advancement of age and changes in life-cycle stages there appeared to have changes in female autonomy and general freedom of choice and movement. This was the result of shifts in physical and economic dependence of parents to their sons. Likewise, her kids grow up becoming her strength against fading older generations.

Another factor that seemed to empower a female throughout her life was the mental maturity and experience that she gained as she grew older herself. The discussions with the respondents supported the family development theory as discussed by Gavazzi, (2011). It appeared that as daughters grow in their paternal households they get more and more freedom of choice and autonomy. They also start to influence decision making in their homes and personal lives. When they get married their freedom and influence both have developed again from the start and it depends a lot on the inter-family relationships in the new family, as time passes she again starts developing her position and say. She reaches the peak during her late early old age. With time further this starts declining again as she and her husband become dependent on their kids both physically and financially.

This, however, is not a simple relationship and a lot of other factors affect all-female empowerment. However, life-cycle stages

roughly do have the same effects as predicted by family development theory.

3.8 Physical Health

Physical health covered both long time illnesses and physical disabilities. As these participants shared that their financial independence and high qualifications did nothing to save them from social reactions to their poor physical health.

Physical illness not only takes away energy and health from a female but her pride and position too. She has to suffer from emotional and physical traumas at the same time. During prolonged illnesses, even personal families sometimes stop being cooperative.

Similar to the account of a housewife a professional doctor faced almost the same fate. Illness especially which is permanent is seemed by the family members as a constant drain on their incomes and responsibility. There is also an element of abhorrence and repulsion of the disease is of such nature.

All these factors impact the confidence level of physically impaired or ill females. Their self-esteem and self-belief are shattered due to which they are not able to realize their full potential and lead emotionally depressed and suppressed lives.

3.9 Marital Status

The marriage appeared to be a factor in which social recognition and respect of females were decided. Several examples of this fact were observed during the study. Marriage seems to be a certificate of being socially acceptable. There is stereotyping of older unmarried females. They are considered lesser as compared to the married-on-the-right-age lot. This exists irrespective of family background, social class, and income-group and education level. Social stigmas faced by older females and those who cannot conceive on time are the signs of overall social disempowerment.

What is hard to understand is that instead of males, it is the female group that is most cruel of their gender in such cases. Females are dependent upon males in multiple respects hence, they do not want to confront them, and rather they take out their frustration on their group. They are jealous of other females closer to the male members, as a result, there seems to be a cold war going on between females themselves, which hinders their collective as well as individual empowerment at various levels. Therefore, empowerment efforts and breaking these stereotypes will require efforts on social levels instead of only women-targeted empowerment policies.

3.10 Number of Sons

Wiklander, 2010 believes that the number of sons born to a female gets her more empowerment. In rural as well as urban setups sons when they grow up are still the source of physical and emotional protection for their mothers not only from outsiders but also within extended families.

Many times, a female with only ‘female issues’ faces insults and belittling remarks from their family members. This appears to be severe in uneducated and rural classes. In addition to physical protection sons when they grow up also are financial security for their mothers.

3.11 Personal Qualities

This appeared to be one of the strongest aspects of empowerment in women. Qualities like confidence, patience, initiative, high self-esteem, resilience, and positivity mattered a lot in empowering a female.

3.12 Patience

Patience was seen as the strongest virtue of females in Punjab. They seemed to be able to take a lot on themselves quietly and face diversities with some inner strength. As supported by Dr. Orloff (2012), patience empowers a person by bringing emotional freedom. It is an active emotional state where a person takes on the decisions to wait and be serene about life processes without haste.

Where some appeared to have a religious base for patience, others appeared to have the patience due to gratitude for almost everything in their lives. Their focus was not on material or financial difficulties rather on their emotional blessings.

The virtue of patience was seen to have various reasons for different females. However, the following response seemed to be the summary of all different responses regarding patience. These females realized themselves to be on divine responsibility of caretaking of their families and happily so.

3.13 Self-Esteem

Where some females had high self-esteem others seemed to have struggled, learning through past experiences. It appeared that those who suffered from low self-esteem had low wellbeing as well (Ciarrochi, Heaven and Fiona 2007; Baumeister, Campbell and Krueger 2003).

3.14 Desire to Improve

Desire to improve life and learning appeared to be a strong determinant of the empowerment level of females in Punjab. This was not limited to urban or educated classes, rather less-educated rural females were somehow more enthusiastic to improve their lives. Taking challenges and trying new things was the way of improving learning throughout their lives for some.

By initiative and curiosity, these females are empowering themselves through various activities which not only help them but also the community they are a part of. According to research done at Stanford (2014), it is the mindset and attitude that helps a person develop. The initiative, innovation, and curiosity were three important elements of the required mindset.

3.15 Approach towards Life

Optimism in life seemed to empower females by keeping them hopeful and strong. It seemed to keep them focused on their role

and goals in life. An optimistic person sees opportunities in dark times too as she does not waste her energies on cribbing. These females appeared to have mastered the art. They have learned to live within their meager means and still think positively about life and dream for the future.

During this research, I came across strong females and exemplary mothers who by looking at life even in the worst times with optimism lead their families out of adversities and into the boom. Their optimism empowered them and their families by hoping for better futures and Even totally uneducated females possessed optimism, which meant somehow this personal quality empowering females was inborn.

3.16 Resilience

Resilience was very high in females of Punjab. They seemed to hold on even in the worst conditions of life (Fredli, 2009). It helped these poor ladies to face hardships but still stay strong and to come up with innovative entrepreneurial ideas that sustain and empower them along with their families (Windle and Bennett, 2011; Fergus and Zimmerman, 2005).

3.17 Self Confidence

It is hard to see a non-confident as an empowered one. For having the freedom of choice and decision making one first must have emotional freedom, which comes with self-confidence. However, it appeared that self-confidence was a varying factor.

3.18 Tolerance

Tolerance was defined as the ability to withstand and be companionate to the person having very different views in life (Teven, McCroskey and Richmond 1998).

3.19 Gratitude

Being grateful under all circumstances is having gratitude (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001). Those

respondents who possessed this quality were positive about life and more empowered Wood, A. M., et al. (2010).

3.20 Native definition of Women empowerment

Noor Mohammed (2015) discussed that empowerment is a subjective measure with loads of influence coming from local culture and social norms. Sensoy and Marshall (2010) agreed to this as well. This was found to be true as native definition derived from this qualitative study lead to altogether different dimensions and indicators of women empowerment as compared to international ones. Plus if any dimension was similar in name, the similarity ended at the name as the conceptualization of every dimension was very different. In the end following definition emerged.

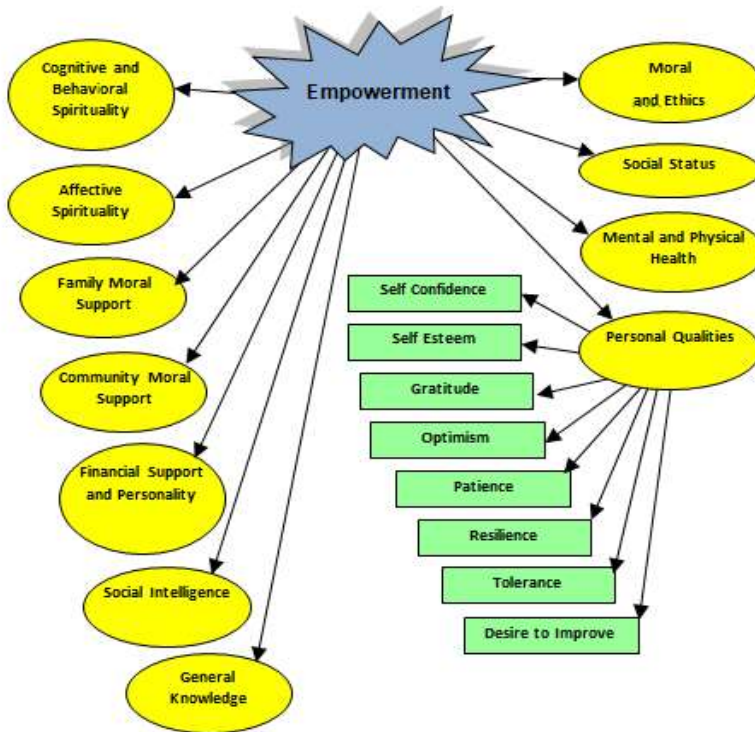
“ the ability to contribute to self and the society in the sense of expansion of choice within religious and social limits, maintaining familial, communal and social harmony, while utilizing personal abilities to maximum potential.”

Generally speaking there was a lot of difference between international and local dimensions of empowerment which is obvious from the comparison table given on the next page. This means that when policies of empowering women are discussed in different cultures and countries they should be aware of the local dimensions and composition of empowerment of their respective females. If not they will always face failures due to misallocation of resources and ill-planned actions. This is a very important paper that established the subjective nature of empowerment as a construct and also emphasized the importance of a participatory approach to the operationalization of empowerment.

Table 3
Comparison of local and international dimensions of women empowerment

General International Dimensions of Empowerment	Locally Generated Dimensions of Empowerment by Current Research
Education	Personal Qualities
Health	Family Moral Support
Earning opportunities and Control on assets	Financial Support and Personality
Decision Making Power	Affective Spirituality
Political Empowerment	Community moral Support
Social mobility and Empowerment	Cognitive and Behavioral Spirituality
Psychological Empowerment	Social Etiquettes
	General knowledge
	Mental and Physical Health
	Morals & Ethics

Model



4. Conclusions

About the native or local definition and dimensions of women empowerment, the following conclusions were drawn after the qualitative analysis.

Dimensions of women empowerment in the local definition were very different from the international definition. The dimensions which strongly influenced the empowerment of Pakistani women included dimensions related to personal qualities and spirituality. Instead of dimensions that gave women more control over materialistic life aspects, Pakistani women preferred the dimensions which dealt with their family unity, closeness to their creator and gave them recognition and respect.

Women empowerment strongly appeared to be a communal concept as compared to individualistic international construct. Furthermore, in Pakistan women disagreed with the secular concept of empowerment. They preferred a more holistic measure that covered both spiritual and worldly aspects.

Gender equity as compared to gender equality was the demand of Pakistani women in defining women empowerment. They appeared to be strong proponents of gender roles and their boundaries. They felt that the role given to them by Almighty raised them in a spiritual sense and they did not want to lower themselves by accepting the western definition of equality to males.

Women's empowerment in Pakistan seemed to be a very multifaceted demographic and geographical spreading. It was not correlated to education level, rural-urban divide or income class. Surprisingly 'Abusive empowerment' appeared as the biggest source of low empowerment level in women within Pakistan. It appeared that women themselves somehow were responsible for hindering the empowerment process of each other.

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