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Rethinking the Approaches to Women Empowerment: Bangladesh Perspective

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Abstract: This research re-examines the approaches to women empowerment highlighting their weakness in the existing field of application. The three approaches of women empowerment-integrated development approach, economic development approach and consciousness raising and organizing approach are not fulfilling the expectation of women as the whole process of decision making is done by the men, whereas women participation is indispensable for equal, just and gender unbiased society. The findings of the article indicate that women are ignored in decision making process because male attitude towards female is not positive, which causes gender discrimination in the society leading the existing approaches of women empowerment to rethinking for a new approach, which may fulfill the goal of women empowerment in the new millennium. This study comes to a conclusion suggesting the new approach for the empowerment of women in this challenging era of globalized world.

Key words: Participation, decision making, control, power

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is a country of South Asian region consisting of more than twelve crores population. Of them women constitute approximately half. Bangladesh is also treated as the traditional society because nearly eighty percent populations are still living on agricultural occupation, whereas penetration of modernity has set the society in a transitional demarcation. Moreover, culture and society of Bangladesh treat women very differently. So due to male and female differentiation, women's contributions are often ignored, rights are violated and decisions are despised. That is why women called the most deprived section of the society. In all spheres of life, they are suppressed by the patriarchal beliefs and traditional social norms and values. They are fully dependent on their male partners. Social thinkers believe that some organized and systematic efforts are needed to change the women lives. So in this regard they have been trying to develop some approaches to materialize their thinking. Many governmental and non-governmental organizations have taken some provisions considering these approaches of women empowerment to change their lives. Those efforts have made a precious little change due to some constraints. None of the approaches has

given a holistic view to empower the women. So in this backdrop this paper makes an attempt to propose an alternative approach, which is presumed to be suitable for the empowerment of women in Bangladesh.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is based on an empirical study. Different methods are followed to carry out this study. First, all existing theoretical approaches have been reviewed with empirical data depending on some published articles and research works regarding this field, and hypothesis has been drawn for alternative approach to empowerment of women. Secondly, the data have been collected from 110 middle aged married women (Table 1) who are mostly educated (Table 2) and involved in income earning activities (Table 3) using a structured interview schedule including questions pertinent to women empowerment. In this regard respondents' suggestions are sought to prove the statement. This study has been conducted on first quarter of the year 2005 at Sylhet in Bangladesh.

Concept of women empowerment: The word 'Empowerment' has been using loosely and widely in development discourse and has become most of the

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by their age

Age distribution	Frequency	Percentage
20-24	13	11.81
25-29	35	31.81
30-34	25	22.72
35-39	20	18.18
40-44	10	9.09
45+	7	6.36
Total	110	100

Table 2: Respondents' educational qualification

Educational qualification	Frequency	Percentage
Illiterate	12	10.90
Class-1 to Class-5	9	8.18
Class-6 to Class-10	28	25.45
Class-11 to Class-12	26	23.63
Class-13 +	35	31.81
Total	110	100

Table 3: Distribution of profession

Profession	Frequency	Percentage
Service holder	26	23.63
Housewife	42	38.18
Teacher	20	18.18
Small business	9	8.18
Physician	3	2.27
Lawyer	4	3.63
Maid servant	6	5.45
Total	110	100

burning issues in recent decades. The concept of women empowerment appears publicly through critical discussions, dialogues and debates by Third World feminists. Generally, women empowerment means to take part in decision-making process that enhances her worthy living. It is an active multi-dimensional process that enables women to realize their full identity and power in all spheres of life. Broadly, it is defined as control over material assets, economic resources and ideology. The process of challenging the existing power relations and of gaining greater control over the sources of power may be termed as empowerment (Batliwala, 1995). Women are the most vulnerable segments of population in the society due to the gender inequality. They can't take their own decision because of male dominance attitude. Thus, it seems a struggle against patriarchal social system. Women Empowerment is both a process and a result of the process. Keller and Mbwewe (1991, as cited in Rowlands, 1995) describe it as a process whereby women become able to organize themselves to increase their self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination. Here the process of empowerment requires transformation of structures of sub-ordination, control over material and intellectual resources, gaining decisions, making authority and reduction of gender inequality. This requires that women must recognize their strategic needs, their social position and understand how coercive it is.

Considering the above discussion we can define empowerment as a concept that gives women the authority to make choices and decisions that facilitates the development of knowledge and control over resources to exercise the rights.

Major theoretical approaches to women empowerment in Bangladesh:

Three experimental approaches have been undertaken in south Asia to empower the women, like Integrated Development Economic Empowerment and Consciousness Raising (Sushama, 1998). While these approaches differ from each other in concept, all these approaches have placed the importance on group formation to build solidarity among women and most organizations are working on the ground take a blend of approaches.

Integrated development approach:

Integrated Development Approach conceives that women are powerless due to greater poverty and lower access to health care, education and survival resources. It provides a package of intervention to alleviate poverty, meet basic survival needs, reduce gender discrimination and help women gain self-esteem. This approach proceeds either by forming women collectives that engage in development activities and tackle social problems, like dowry, child marriage and male alcoholism (Proshika in Bangladesh; RDRS in Rajasthan India). At times an entry point strategy is employed using a specific activity. These include literacy class or health programs to mobilize women into groups (Gonoshtyia Kendra in Bangladesh).

Economic development approach:

According to Economic Empowerment Approach, women are subordinated due to lack of economic power. It focuses on improving women control over material resources and strengthening economic security of women. It is necessary to make women collective. Groups are formed using two methods i.e., organizing women around savings and credit; income generation or skill training activities (Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, program of Credit for Rural Women in Nepal); or by occupation or location (SEWA in India. Proshika). These groups may work ranging areas including saving and credit, training and skills development, new technologies or marketing, as well as provide such ancillary supports as child care, health services, literacy programs and legal education and aid.

Consciousness raising and organizing approach:

Consciousness raising approach gives a special focus on women awareness about the complex factors causing women subordination. It conceives that women are not

empowered due to lack of knowledge. This approach organizes women into collectives that tackle the sources of subordination (ASTHA, Deccan Development Society, Mahila Samakhya, WOP in India, Nigera Kori in Bangladesh). Here, women are mobilized to struggle for greater access to resources rather than passively provided with schemes and services. This approach is successful in enabling women to address their position and strategic needs but may not be as effective in meeting their immediate needs.

After a meticulous examination of the existing major approaches of empowerment we can go a bit further to decide that, although apparently the existing approaches are quite interesting and important to women empowerment, but none of the approach considers the attitude of male towards female, which is supposed to be the most important factor to empower women. Still all the decisions come from the male head of the household whether they would participate or not in any kind of activities for their daily lives. Male support is indispensable for executing all kinds of activities of family affair. Due to the necessity of the male support in participation of women in the decision making process of the household, it is absolutely ignored in the existing approaches of empowerment. So it is rationale to propose an approach that would give us a holistic view and new direction in the way of empowering women, which is expecting to meet the demand of time.

Review of related research and proposing research statement: Women are deprived in all spheres of life. From birth to death they are dependent on male. At the age of childhood and adolescence they are dependent on father and it turns after their marriage on husband and at widowhood on their son. They never get free from their male dominance. But it is not for their distinct biological feature; it is due to the social construction of gender and sex roles. Though they have equal mental capabilities, they think as inferior to their male. They are passing their days combating a lot of sufferings created from gender discrimination. Ultimately national development is hampering because it is quite impossible to bring a sustainable development keeping them outside the mainstream of development. For this reason a number of government and voluntary actions have been launched to empower the women for ensuring their active participation in development process. There is no universal approach for empowering women. In Asia and South Asian countries, three experimental approaches have been undertaken for empowering women. While these approaches differ from each other in terms of concept yet most of the organizations are following all the three

approaches simultaneously. But they are giving special emphasis on micro-credit system owing to their institutional interest. There should not be any doubt that micro credit's social implication is as important as its economic implications. Some research reports shows a outrageous feature that gives us impetus to think about the effectiveness of these approaches. Alam (1999) has shown that husband use all their credits in lieu of them. Their mail guardians are determining how and where the credits would be utilized and how it would be reversed. Interesting fact is that women are dependent on their male to repay their loan. In most of the cases, they are unable to pay their installments hence the credit collectors put some extra pressures which become later an unbearable burden to them and finally face police harassment. Furthermore, husband and wife come into conflict for their different views regarding the loan utilization and reverse.

Rahman (1998) study has expressed a dismal picture regarding micro-credit. He has found that the micro credit is helping the women to increase their income but he is very doubtful about its effectiveness and sustainability among women. His report also expresses that about 60% of the women credit holders do not use the money by themselves. Their husbands are doing that. He adds that the credit sometimes creates inconsistencies and conflicts inside the family, which is resulted in unhappiness among them (Rahman, 1998). Hashemi *et al.* (1996) acknowledge that it is not possible to change our larger patriarchal structures through micro-credit but women are gaining more power and control increasingly over their lives within familial domain. Goetz and Gupta's (1996) study challenges the assumption that women always use loans allocated for them. They also refer that in two-thirds of the loans either significantly or partially are controlled by the husband brought into the household. Women were unable to make their own decisions on how to invest or use the loan. This is an important finding as it supports Mayoux's study which expresses that empowerment cannot be assumed to be an automatic outcome of micro-finance programs especially given socio-cultural settings such as in Bangladesh where women are extremely disempowered to begin with (Mayoux, 2000). The critics of NGO activities argue that because of the patriarchal social structure of rural Bangladesh micro-credit does not necessarily lead to women empowerment; it might even worsen their situation (Goetz and Gupta, 1996) (Greenhalgh, 1991). Another study reveals that there was not a single woman who had taken the permission of her husband prior to taking the loan. It also admits that women sometimes make a hustle with their husband and finally can take loan and work independently if their husband gives permission to. To a greater extent their

freedom and aspirations are still in the hands of man who abuse women and even execute separation for their individual interests (Zareen and Khan, 2001). Although the micro-credit has meaningful contributions to raise awareness and increase women mobility outside the home, gendered attitude, socio-cultural practices, kinship relations and familial positions deprived women of full participation in development. The study concludes that economic empowerment, though effective to reduce poverty situation, alone is not enough to overall empowerment of women (Adhikari, 2004).

Shahnaj Parveen *et al.* (2004) have conducted a study where they have shown that the level of women empowerment is not satisfactory at household level. It also highlights the fact that formal and non-formal education, exposure to information media and spatial mobility are the most influential factors that accelerate women empowerment. In contrast, the traditional beliefs, attitudes and practices are deeply entrenched with the women lives and create problems to empower women.

Consciousness raising approach has also failed to bring the changes in women's lives. Women are controlled and directed by their male guardians. They can't participate in any program outside their home without their consent. They are not aware of their rights and privileges due to ignorance and illiteracy. Though education is the key mean of enlightening women, they embrace a little chance for education as because their male guardians also decide how much she would learn.

After a careful examination of the existing major approaches to empowerment of women and subsequent activities, it can be conclude that the successes that have so far been achieved reach a little to our expectation. The problem of women empowerment is rooted to the social structure of Bangladesh and other countries of Indian-sub-continent. Male dominated social system or patriarchal social attitude is the main key factor for women's sub-ordination. Under patriarchal social system, all the decisions come from the male head of the household (Husband, father, son or even father-in-law) actually define the role performance of women whether they would participate or not in any kind of activities in their daily lives in family or society. Thus, any kind of activities taken for uplifting the status of women will not be fruitfully implemented without the consent and support of their male head. The discussion states the immense need to change the males' attitude towards their females to make them empowered. But none of the approach considers the attitude of male though it is an important factor to empower the women in Bangladesh. So, it is our intend interest to propose an alternative approach considering the attitude of male that would give a holistic view and new direction in the way of empowering women.

SEARCHING AN ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It is evident from the research findings that the strategies and approaches followed by various organizations for empowering women can hardly met our desire. The study indicates some interesting information regarding women's empowerment that keeps pace with our hypothesis. Both in the middle and upper class family, male is empowered to take all decisions. Hence women can participate rarely in the process of decision-making ins and outs of the family affairs if their husbands welcome them. The study explores that women had to rely on their male guardian's opinion even in taking the decisions related to them. Husbands determine whether they will take part in income earning activities or not. Most of the respondents (79%) report that they are not usually congratulated to any income generating activities in case of husband's disagreement (Table 5). They can't freely spend or use their income or loan (Table 6). In most of the cases, they spend all of their credits as family maintenance cost. They also face assorted difficulties to repay their loans as they have control a bit over their loan. Income earning does not always work as an instrument to have the decisions. About 62% women have self income (Table 4) but more than half of the respondents (65%) admit that their participation in decision-making remains unchanged in spite of increasing their income (Table 7). On the contrary, women opinions get the importance in taking family decisions though they have no income whereas the family members are educated. So we can hardly say that women could be empowered if they can avail the opportunity of income earning activities.

Women are not aware of their rights and privileges due to illiteracy and ignorance. Considering this situation, development workers are more concerned to make them conscious through awareness campaigning fixing up a target the women. But this effort has also slaughtered because women are controlled and directed by their husband. They can't participate in community meeting defying their husband's opinion. About 52% respondents can't go out side their home conniving at their husbands' opinion (Table 8). Their participation would be ensured at the meeting if their husbands allow them for. About 96.36% women have identified the male dominance attitude as a major hindrance to empower women (Table 9). So awareness should be increased among the women as well as their male head. In this study, almost the cent percent (98 percent) respondents expressed their opinion in support of changing the attitude of male whereas 88 percent on female education and awareness, 65 percent on economic independency and 58 percent on ensuring mutual understanding between husband and

Table 4: Distribution of monthly income

Monthly income	Frequency	Percentage
0	42	38.18
1-2000	19	17.27
2001-4000	14	12.72
4001-6000	10	9.09
6001-8000	9	8.18
8001-10000	10	9.09
10000+	6	5.45
Total	110	100

Table 5: Respondents' opinion regarding the causes for not involving in income generating activities

Causes	Frequency N = 42	Percentage
Business in household activities	31	73.80
Lack of employment opportunity	1	2.38
Women should not go out for work	2	4.76
Husband's disagreement	34	78.63
Lack of family member's support	15	35.71
Others	12	28.57

Table 6: Respondents' control over income and expenditure

Opinion of the respondents	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	40	58.82
No	24	35.30
Often	4	5.88
Total	68	100

Table 7: Whether they get more importance from their family/husband as an income earner

Opinion of respondents	Frequency N = 68	Percentage
Increase	24	35.29
Unchanged	44	64.71
Total	68	100

Table 8: Whether they can participate in any program without the consent of their husband

Opinion of the respondents	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	39	35.45
No	57	51.81
Often	14	12.72
Total	110	100

Table 9: Impediments to the pathway of women empowerment

Opinion of respondent	Frequency N = 110	Percentage
Lack of female education	89	80.90
Male dominated attitude	106	96.36
Female's economic dependency	64	61.45
Unequal distribution of resources	26	23.63
Female in security	69	62.72
Others	18	16.36

Table 10: Respondents' recommendations to empower the women

Recommendation	Frequency N = 110	Percentage
Male attitude should be changed	104	94.54
Increasing female literacy and awareness	97	88.18
Ensuring women security	72	65.45
Ensuring mutual understanding between husband and wife	64	58.18
Others	19	17.27

Table 11: Responses regarding the most effective approach to women empowerment

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Economic development	14	12.72
Awareness raising and organizing	12	10.90
Integrated development	12	10.90
Change Approach (Our hypothesis)*	72	65.45
Total	110	100

*Change Approach covers all the changes in the society related to women empowerment; i.e., change in values and attitudes, income, employment, education, access to property and resources, participation in taking the decision in the family

wife (Table 10). Male should be the target group and their attitude should be changed towards their female member. In this study, the majority portion (65.45%) women consider our hypothesis to be the most important and hence most effective approach to women empowerment. Respondent's opinion regarding another three approaches are very insignificant. Only 10.90 percent consider economic development approach, 10.90 percent consider awareness raising approach and 12.72 percent consider overall development approach as most important and effective approach to women empowerment (Table 11).

CONCLUSIONS

Women empowerment is a process of establishing control over resources. But the degree of control will depend on some factors, e.g., income level and poverty, education, social norms and values where male attitude is predominant. In Bangladesh, customary male dominated attitude towards women is the major encumbrance to the pathway of women empowerment. If the male heads give them more access, women will get greater control over resources. For these reason, a comprehensive and coordinated approach comprising the existing three approaches of women empowerment would be needed to empower the women where special focus would be given on changing the attitudes of male towards their female. This approach can be termed as 'Change Approach'.

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