

RECONSIDERING THE NOTION OF 'WOMEN' EMPOWERMENT ALONG THE 'FEMINIST' ACCOUNT OF POWER

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Abstract: Power is the core concept that is attached with empowerment. We notice that there is a kind of power *given* to women if we talk about the idea of empowerment. The question that arises is, 'which unit *gives* this power to women?' The answer is, the Patriarchy. Until now, we observe that the term "empowerment" mainly referred to elevating the political, economic, social power and intensity of women. The approach to empowerment was defined exclusively in general and masculine terms. Due to such traditional and long-established viewpoints, even women had started to suppress their feminine voices and abide by the ideals of the patriarchal system. Women mainly feel empowered by rejecting the inbred and constitutional feminine traits. Contrary to this view, according to me the chief and most initial progression towards empowerment is to examine the meaning of the power *within* approach. The fundamental question that I shall address in my paper is, 'How can we offer a more /comprehensive account of women empowerment? In this regard, my aim here is to demonstrate how the act of embracing the feminist idea of power may serve as the most cardinal route to women empowerment.

In order to answer the above mentioned question, I shall divide my paper into three sections. In the first section, I shall briefly explore the notion of women empowerment generally. Here I shall also explain the connection between power and empowerment. In the second section of my paper, I shall attempt to address the question, 'what the feminist account of power is'? For the sake of clarity and precision, I shall refer to the concept of power along feminist lines as power *within*. For theoretical assistance, I shall take into consideration, the contributions made by theorists like Virginia Held, Srilatha Batliwala, Nancy Hartsock, Mary Caputi, Thomas Wartenberg, etc. This way I shall support the view that *women* empowerment must firstly embrace the idea of power *within*. In the final section, I shall try to re-consider the concept of women empowerment and demonstrate how the act of embracing the approach to power *within* and changing our perspective towards the way we conceive power and empowerment. This way I shall pave a way for a more comprehensive and inclusive account of empowerment.

Therefore, women should be able to free themselves from the burden of this pre-dominant patriarchal arrangement. Also, the concepts like power and empowerment must be re-defined and re-thought upon. It is important to understand the feminist account of power i.e the idea of power *within*. This could serve as a very significant and sustaining framework that if adopted would help women empower themselves and preserve their existence. There is an urgent need to reconsider the entire design of women empowerment which is more spiritual and impartial.

Introduction: The Problem: Generally, one can define empowerment as a notion that is related to terms such as freedom, agency, authenticity, choice, decision making ability, liberal participation and rise in self-confidence. As far as women empowerment is considered, it has only focused on development of skills, power in decision making, political rights, financial autonomy, economic stability, unbiased access to education and so on. All this while, women have simply embraced a more patriarchal account of empowerment that deals with having authority or control *over*. A question I pose in this respect is, 'what does empowerment mean at an individual level?'

As, Vallerie Miller writes in her article, "Empowerment is a process that involves individual discovery and change."¹ My aim is at reaching out to something that can be have power *over*. What I suggest is that when talking about the idea of women empowerment, it is equally important to through ample light upon the idea of power *within* as well. This way, I propose that the concept of power appears to be different for women. As the feminists submit, women mainly stay inclined towards realizing power *to* and power *within*. It is important to undertake the exposition of power feminism in order to understand the concept of women empowerment in a more inclusive and exhaustive way. This way, my main objective here is to free women from the long-established gendered idea of power and empowerment.

Margaret Hall writes in this respect, “Women’s empowerment is least developed in the most traditional patriarchal societies. Both collective and interpersonal levels of women’s empowerment are inhibited by institutional hierarchical authority structures in traditional patriarchal societies.”² This excerpt from Margaret Hall’s writing serves as an argument that proves the intensity of patriarchal and hierarchical inclinations that the long prevailing idea of power and women empowerment had.

Therefore, it is claimed by various feminists that the idea of women empowerment is not wholly developed and in fact favors a male ideal, because of this it has become vital to re-consider the very idea of power along feminist lines. By doing so, women would be able to free themselves from the burden and obligation of the patriarchal arrangement.

Women Empowerment: An Overview: In this section I shall mainly focus on providing a conceptual clarity of the idea of empowerment. According to Naila Kabeer, empowerment is “the expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them.”³ This definition of empowerment only talks about empowerment as an authority or grant of power. According to me, empowerment means something more; it is something that is linked to an individual’s inner construction and propensity. Till now, we have been looking at the idea of empowerment only with reference to the word ‘woman’. It is important to firstly understand that femininity is the main constitution of a woman; it is her essence, her true nature. If we start conceiving the true nature of woman and acknowledge her feminine traits in order to explore the concept of empowerment and power, it is then that we would come up to a more overreaching and comprehensive account of power and empowerment.

Further, I will now refer to the idea of power in order to demonstrate what empowerment actually means. In this regard, Rowlands introduces four categorizations of power, namely, power *over*, power *to*, power *with* and power *from within*.⁴ According to me, the most important and unique kind of power is the fourth one, i.e power *from within*. It is to be noticed that this way he indirectly relates each aspect of power *with* empowerment. Power *over* looks into empowerment as control, power *to* looks into empowerment as a choice, power *with* looks into empowerment in community, and the fourth one i. e power *from within* considers empowerment as an something that has intrinsic realization and constitutional consciousness. This is the idea that I shall largely argue in favor for in my paper.

Now the question that arises is, ‘what is women empowerment?’ According to me, women empowerment is not a single dimensional idea. It is in fact an undertaking through which women are facilitated to act powerfully. Women empowerment doesn’t revolve around a very shallow idea that the quality of life must be politically, financially or economically enriched. Instead, it must focus upon the individual as an accomplished, virtuous and honorable being.

I would now like to discuss about the extensity of the idea of women empowerment. They are as follows:

1. Women empowerment aims at strengthening self-image and self-worth in women.
2. It allows women to think in an evaluative and critical manner.
3. Women are enabled to take decisions independently without any outward influence.
4. Women are even enabled to choose freely.
5. It helps women build a positive image of the ‘feminine’ self.
6. It also confirms equal involvement and contribution of women in the development operation.
7. Women empowerment even fosters the legal domain and the status of women in this regard. Women are very well aware of their legal rights and grants.

The above presented scheme of women empowerment is quite fulfilled and unabridged but what I would like to comment upon in this regard is that this idea of empowerment doesn’t bring women close to their own constitution and ideology. I quote Srilatha Batliwala, she writes, “women’s empowerment involves challenging patriarchal relations, which in turn requires that women first ‘recognize the ideology that legitimizes male domination and understand how it perpetuates their oppression.”⁵

This way, women empowerment must be re-framed and re-considered in order to come up with an all-inclusive and sufficient. In the next section, I shall offer a conceptual analysis of the idea of power *within* and show how this ultimately paves a way to women empowerment.

The Idea of Power *Within* as a Guide to Women Empowerment: We have always talked about women empowerment in general terms. The problem lies due to the fact that we have always considered the idea of

power as a negative force. Power has only been conceptualized in terms of power *over*. This idea of power *over*, according to my understanding is a masculine and patriarchal abstraction.

It is essential to talk about women and their natural construction when discussing the concept of power and empowerment, largely. When I say this, I indirectly connect the concept of human agency that is involved in the empowerment process. Agency refers to the innate capacity of individuals to act in accord with their natural dispositions and personal inclinations. This way empowerment is closely linked with the idea of agency.

This idea of true self that I have written about has been masked because to be empowered meant that one should be strong and rigid. The milder and essential side of women has been completely ignored when talking about empowerment. Mary Caputi writes about women, they are “sensitive creatures given more to a caring, interconnected web of human relationships than to the rugged individualism espoused by men.”⁶ Therefore, there is an innate capability within women to serve as caring, compassionate and relative beings. If we examine the viewpoints presented by the Care ethicists, we observe that even their main line of argument revolved around the idea that women morality, politics, identity, society differently. For instance, Virginia Held says that women are intrinsically caring beings and their nature differs as compared to men. Due to this constitutional arrangement, women even perceive power differently.

The question that shall be addressed here is, ‘what does empowerment along feminist lines entail?’ In order to answer this question, it is important to firstly understand what the idea of feminine power is. The notion of power was only concerned with the act of controlling or attaining authority. Contrary to this, power along feminist lines can be defined as the power to realize and create things that are beyond one’s control. It deals with the proposal that women are mainly inclined towards attaining power from *within*. It mainly embraces virtues such as care, love, receptivity, compassion, vulnerability, spiritual connection, self-expression, etc. This way in order to meet things that are beyond our control, there is a need to formulate and sustain this new system of power i.e the power *within*. Power along feminist angle entails a higher sense of care, love, self-image, receptivity, sensitivity, vulnerability etc.

“The women’s movement at its deepest is not an effort to play “catch-up” with the competitive, aggressive “dog-eat-dog” spirit of the dominant system. It is rather, an attempt to convert men and the system to the sense of responsibility, nurturance, openness, and rejection of hierarchy that are part of our vision.”⁷ This excerpt suggests that we must not aim at simply accepting the male ideal, instead, there is a need to firstly embrace our true nature and also re-consider other aspects that form an integral part of individuals and their social framework.

Cultivation of power in regard to the power *within* aspect is the most comprehensive and authentic dimension of power. This version of power is closely connected to the idea of empowerment. If we look into the concept of empowerment along the power *within* approach, what we come across is a system that is closely connected to inbred and constitutional consciousness of a person. There is a role played by the ‘internal’ design and empowerment is given a kind of an essential, spiritual and internal angle.

Jeak Baker Miller writes that, “there is enormous validity in women’s not wanting to use power as it is presently conceived and used.”⁸

Also, a redefined version of empowerment is one that doesn’t simply deal with freely gaining power *over* something or someone. Instead, it is a process. Srilatha Batliwala explains the process as follows:

“The term empowerment refers to a range of activities from individual self-assertion to collective resistance, protest and mobilization that challenge basic power relations. For individuals and groups where class, caste, ethnicity and gender determine their access to resources and power, their empowerment begins when they not only recognize the systemic forces that oppress them, but act to change existing power relationships. Empowerment, therefore, is a process aimed at changing the nature and direction of systemic forces that marginalize women and other disadvantaged sectors in a given context.”⁹

My interpretation of Srilatha’s version of empowerment denotes that empowerment must not only deal with a kind of ‘force’ or ‘imposition’. Empowerment doesn’t only deal with the well being at an individual level. Instead, it is in fact a process under which individuals not only define or realize personal goals, but also aim at promoting individual well being. It also has a spiritual and intimate aspect attached to it. Empowerment is also

about challenging and changing the existing patterns in the society by examining gender roles and their influence. There is a need to re-examine the entire notion of power and empowerment, largely.

This way I do not aim at presenting a model of empowerment that focuses on a more external and masculine approach. Instead, agency would be attained when we women start to accept the innate qualities that form our essence (qualities like, care, love, compassion, sensitivity, vulnerability, etc). Once a woman embraces these qualities of femininity and also their feminine bodies, it is then that their lives would be empowered.

Virginia Held says that the masculine account of power perceives power to cause others to submit to one's will.¹⁰ She also talks about the nature of women as more caring, loving and compassionate beings. According to her, these traits form the main essence of women and once they get acceptance, the whole concept of power from a woman's perspective would change. In this regard, she writes, "the capacity to give birth and to nurture and empower could be the basis for new and more humanly promising conceptions than the ones that now prevail of power, empowerment, and growth"¹¹

This way, one can say that women and men view the idea of power differently. It has been noticed that, until now a very masculine pattern of power prevailed. This idea of power was the power *over* aspect. But, if we start perceiving 'women' empowerment not only as a process that is very general and neutral. It is important to firstly, embrace the personal and intimate power that lies within and then approach the idea of empowerment along this pattern.

A Feminist Reconsideration of the Idea of Empowerment: It is important to see power and empowerment as a positive force. Instead of abiding by the long established idea of empowerment in terms of the idea of power *over*, that deals with a sense of domination or control, what I propose is that we must look into the idea of women empowerment through a different lens. Nancy Hartsock writes in this regard, "power should be understood as energy and competence rather than dominance."¹²

Moving on, I shall now address the question, 'what view does the feminist account of empowerment generate?' The re-considered version according to me is as follows:

Empowerment as an Expression of True Self: Women empowerment must not come with fixed and inflexible rules. Again, femininity is not about rules, but more about women being able to empower their true selves. Women must accept their inner constitution and follow a more feminist approach to power and being empowered. Empowerment must not be rigid in outlook. When one realizes the power and goodness within, upliftment and empowerment is attained. "The intimate realm of power has to do with one's sense of self, personal confidence, and relationship to body and health."¹³ This version of empowerment shows that empowerment is also connected to the idea of power *within* or intimate power.

Women empowerment according to me is something that is also about spiritual and inner operations. Practically speaking, it is true that empowerment can be fostered only when we have an external aim to reach at. I say that empowerment is simply the act of 'being' you and 'accepting' yourself. Hence, there is an urgency to consider the description of women empowerment from a feminine perspective as well. There is both power and privilege in being a woman. "Empowerment is a process that involves individual discovery and change. Most discussions of empowerment speak about it as a gradual forward-moving process."¹⁴ Therefore, empowerment is a context specific process. Women must aim at realizing their true nature and heading towards empowerment keeping in mind the new revised version of power i.e power *within*.

Empowerment as Being Powerful: Till now, we have followed and accepted a very external approach to empowerment. Empowerment was conceived as a state of freedom that rested upon external factors. It has been seen as a kind of force or control *over* something or someone. According to me, this dimension of empowerment is a very outward and surfaced edition. It is important for women to re-examine the long established idea of power. As Jean Baker Miller claims that "women's examination of power...can bring new understanding to the whole concept of power"¹⁵

I am constantly referring to the concept of power because I feel that it is essential to enquire into the nature of power in order to understand the idea of empowerment exhaustively. In order to explain the concept of *being* powerful, I shall like to bring in the idea of *feeling* powerful. Feeling powerful is what the masculine approach

to power and empowerment aim at achieving. To *feel* powerful implies that one tries to have an authority or control over someone. It depends on temporary ego states. On the other hand, when I claim that empowerment along feminist lines must focus upon the idea of *being* powerful, what I aim at submitting is that power must be conceived as an internal state. *Being* powerful is a more balanced and persisting version of power. To *be* powerful entails a sense of inner strength and a higher sense of self realization. Therefore, we must consider the *being* powerful approach, in order to come up to a more concrete understanding of women empowerment.

Empowerment as Cultivation of Power *Within*: Rowlands talks about power within as the most cardinal aspect related to empowerment. Women empowerment along this line must aim at cultivating the power that lies within us. This way a more subjective angle would be granted to the idea of empowerment. And when we talk about women and their subjectivity, it becomes important to consider the innate and inbred traits and dispositions that form their identity. Not just this, the power within approach is favorable because it has to do with an individual's self-development, self-esteem, and self-image. It highly revolves around the notion of a 'self'. Once we start conceiving empowerment in relation to the idea of power *within* approach, freedom from subordination or any sort of oppression would be achieved. This way there is a need to embrace the concept of power *within* (a more feminine aspect of power and empowerment, ultimately). It upholds the customary human search for a sense of fulfillment and inclusiveness.

Therefore, women empowerment according to me is something that is also about spiritual and inner operations. Practically speaking, it is true that empowerment can be fostered only when we have an external aim to reach at. I say that, empowerment is simply the act of 'being' powerful and 'accepting' yourself. Hence, there was an urgency to consider the description of women empowerment from a feminine perspective as well. There is both power and privilege in being a woman.

Conclusion: It is important to see power and empowerment as a *positive* force. Instead of abiding by the long established idea of empowerment that rested upon the idea of power *over*, which deals with a sense of domination or control, what I proposed was that we must look into the idea of women empowerment through a different lens. I suggested that in order to re-consider the concept of women empowerment more comprehensively, we must firstly accept a revised version of power. True empowerment would be achieved when we start using and realizing the power that lies *within* us. If we start cultivating the power *within*, we would re-define strength as well. By embracing our intimate power which is strong in its own right, we would be able come up to a more accomplished and comprehensive exposition of the notion of women empowerment.

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