

EMPOWERMENT FROM THE GENDER PERSPECTIVE

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THIS paper discusses gender inequality and the empowerment of women from several perspectives: (1) exclusion and social injustice, (2) the negative impact of inequality and lack of empowerment on individual women as well as families and society, (3) the organizations involved in the battle for gender equality; and (4) suggested actions that will assist women in claiming their full rights in society. Also, we emphasize that leaders of nations and organizations must follow the example of the United Nations and establish specific goals, strategies, and tactics to ensure gender equality and empowerment.

Key Words: Empowerment, Gender Equality.

Introduction

“Gender equality and women’s empowerment is one of the eight United Nations Millennium Developments Goals” (UN, 2008). According to United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, women are not just the target of special measures to promote development. They are also the driving force to overcome poverty, reduce hunger, fight illiteracy, heal the sick, prevent the spread of disease and promote stability (UN, 2008). Gender equality and women’s empowerment are considered to be a desirable by-product of human development. Therefore, to achieve these goals, it is essential to close the gender equality and empowerment gaps in education, employment, and political participation (Kabeer, 2005).

CARE (<http://www.care.org/>, 2008), which was founded in 1946, originally was dedicated to helping poor people overcome suffering by sending packages of basic necessities. Now CARE also focuses on the causes of poverty and seeks its eradication by eliminating its underlying causes (e.g., lack of education, ownership of property, and power to make decisions). So now CARE focuses on the human-conceived systems that exclude, marginalize, and discriminate against certain groups of people. Throughout many countries, CARE builds partnership with other organizations and works to eliminate exclusion and social injustices. Also, CARE seeks to encourage gender equality and women empowerment (<http://www.care.org/>).

Gender equality is considered an important issue for the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) because “gender inequality is an obstacle to progress, a roadblock on the path of human development” (UNDP, 2002, pp.6). Gender equality can be achieved by providing visibility and support to women’s

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contributions in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs for the equal benefit of men and women (Economic and Social Council, 1997).

The Millennium Summit of 2000 proposed four dimensions in which to achieve gender equality i.e., poverty reduction, democratic governance, crisis prevention and recovery, and environment and sustainable development. Also, there is a need to remove internal barriers to women's advancement into senior management, including assistance for women to participate from developing countries (<http://www.undp.org>, 2007). Gender equality implies concern for men and women, and the relationships between them.

Gender inequality can result in disadvantages and differentials for females in terms of life expectancy and children's nutrition, denial of choice, lack of political representation, and lack of empowerment (Kabeer, 1999). The inequality for females exists in contrast to the equality for males. However, in many places, this scenario is so much an integral part of the culture that neither men nor women consider the inequalities unjust. Kabeer (1999) suggests that in those cases (women) have "internalized their social status as persons of lesser value" (p.440). As a result of the internalization, women would acquiesce to male violence, male dominance in decision making, the discrimination against daughters, and other inequalities. Perhaps these women are victims of learned helplessness (Hiroto, 1974; McGrath, 1994; Overmier and Seligman, 1967; Pryor, White and Toombs, 1998, 2007). The essence of learned helplessness is that people continually find that a task cannot be accomplished, they feel helpless. When they feel helpless, they stop trying to accomplish what they perceive to be impossible even after the task or environment has changed and success is possible. Perhaps some women have experienced a society (i.e., people, rituals, rules, and regulations) that so constrained them that even when society changes, they still feel helpless and of lesser value. Martinko and Gardner (1982) indicate that this is Organizationally Induced Helplessness when it is caused by an organization. We suggest that in the case of gender inequality and the lack of empowerment for women this is society-induced and culturally-induced learned helplessness.

Conceptualizing Empowerment

"Freedom is the right to choose: the right to create for oneself the alternative of choice, a (person) is not a (person) but a member, an instrument, a thing. – Thomas Jefferson" (Iyengar and Lepper (1999, p.349)

So unless we want women to exist as instruments or things, we must ensure that they have choice, that they are empowered to make decisions. Empowerment is the ability and power to make one's own choices in terms of resources, agency and achievements (Kabeer, 1999). Resources include a multiplicity of social relationships which are formed as a result of society (such as family, market, community). These are the preconditions to make strategic life choices (Giddens, 1979). "Agency encompasses cognitive processes such as bargaining and negotiation, manipulation, and analysis of capabilities" (Kabeer, 1999, pp.438). Achievements represent the values of those who are doing the measurements i.e., the outcomes of choices and agency (processes) used to achieve the values of the communities in which women live. This would mean a transition from basic functioning, such as life expectancy, to more complex achievements like political representation in the world (UNDP, 1995).

Empowerment of women has emerged from the importance of gender as a socio-cultural system based on unequal power relations between women and men. Pradhan (2003) notes that there has been a shift from the conventional socio-economic perspective of viewing subordination of women in terms of socio-economic measures of power indicated by education, income or access to resources to the empowerment of women economically, demographically, and socially. Pradhan (2003) discusses the need to bring gender equality where men and women are considered equal in every sphere of life because "*if you*

empower a woman, you empower her children, her community and her country” (Pradhan, 2003, pp.51-57). According to Sen and Baltimore (2000), empowerment brings greater self-confidence and increased capability to overcome barriers to resource access as well as implementing the changing ideology i.e. changing role of women in education, income and participation in the labor force.

Kishor (1997) studied empowerment, and the results of her studies which relate to the composite indicators used to measure empowerment are summarized by Kabeer (1999, pp.448-449) and listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Composite Indicators to Measure Empowerment

<p>Direct Evidence of Empowerment (or in the case of Devaluation of women – lack of)</p>	<p>Devaluation of Women: Reports of domestic violence; dowry paid at marriage. Women’s Emancipation: Belief in daughters’ education; freedom of movement. Reported Sharing of Roles and Decision Making: Egalitarian gender roles; egalitarian decision making. Equality in Marriage: Fewer grounds reported for justified divorce by husbands; equality of grounds reported for divorce by husband or wife. Financial Autonomy: Currently controls her earnings; her earnings as share of household income.</p>
<p>Sources of Empowerment</p>	<p>Participation in the modern sector: Index of assets owned; female education. Lifetime exposure to employment: Worked before marriage; controlled earnings before marriage.</p>
<p>Setting Indicators</p>	<p>Family structure amenable to empowerment: Does not now or previously live with in-laws. Marital advantage: Small age difference between spouses; choose husband. Traditional marriage: Large educational Difference with husband; did not choose husband.</p>

In his speeches, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon continues to stress the need to empower women. In his remarks at the March 6, 2007 informal General Assembly debate on gender equality and the empowerment of women, Ban Ki-moon stated that we must pay attention to the fact that “Leaders at the 2005 World Summit declared that gender equality and human rights for all are essential to advancing development, peace, and security” (<http://www.un.org/>). He reminded us that it is not enough to have in place global goals on gender equality and the empowerment of women. We must implement them fully in terms of school enrollment, economic independence, and representation in decision-making boards. He cautioned that in most countries, women are underrepresented in decision-making position, and their work is undervalued, underpaid, or not paid. Ban Ki-moon states, “Out of more than 100 million children who are not in school, the majority (of them) are girls. Out of more than 800 million adults who cannot read, the majority (of them) are women.” While it is bad from the standpoints of humanity and economics that women are uneducated, underpaid, and underrepresented in decision-making bodies, there is something worse. They are also victims of violence on every continent and in every country. Ban Ki-moon says that the violence “takes a devastating toll on women’s lives, on their families, and on society as a whole . . . (and that) most societies (supposedly) prohibit such violence – yet the reality is that, too often, it is covered up or tacitly condoned” (<http://www.un.org/>)

In a white paper, leaders of CARE note that they attempt to guide participants in their research activities and focus groups toward their own definition of an empowered woman. According to respondents in India, Ecuador, Bangladesh, and Yemen, empowered women have the following: (1) “Notions of self-worth and dignity (individual); (2) “Bodily integrity; freedom from coercive forces over a woman’s very body (individual and structure);” (3) “Control and influence over household and public resources (structure and relations);” and (4) “Experience with or appreciation of the value of collective effort and solidarity among women (relations)” (CARE, 2008).

Disempowerment

In developing countries, women are marginalized to the prevailing social system. They are either fighting it or succumbing to it. Various nations and organizations either deliberately or unintentionally dis-empower women. We have chosen the following which were prevalent in India (Batliwala and Dhanraj, 2002.) and which were used to instrumentalize, i.e. dis-empower, women (We also included our suggestions regarding each point):

- Women did not have full access to economic resources. To counteract this, an effort must be made to shift economic resources into women’s hands, gain recognition for women’s roles in household economies and support women’s leadership in local development.
- The notion existed that if there are women in politics they would alter the character of political culture by promoting social and gender equality, peace and sustainable development through values of cooperation and collaboration. While that is true, it is not a reason to keep women out of their rightful place in decision making whether in the political arena or in an organization.
- Sometimes rules, laws, and/or cultural customs kept women subjugated and playing a lesser role. National leaders must change the position and condition of women by addressing her rights and needs strategically and tactically (i.e. by facilitating policies, legislation and the protection and enforcement of women’s right’s).

Once they are given their rightful place in society, women will be able to restructure power, politics and education changing the processes and systems. Women can only be empowered if leaders of nations, schools, businesses and other institutions make a commitment for them to be a full member of society. In speaking for the empowerment of women, Kofi Annan (2006) noted that “It is impossible to realize our goals while discriminating against half the human race”

Problems with Gender Inequality and Lack of Empowerment of Women

The questions relating to women empowerment and gender equality can be answered by reviewing the statistics provided by CARE, “Of the 1.3 billion people who live in absolute poverty around the globe, 70 percent are women” . . . (with) rights denied, opportunities curtailed, and voices silenced (Drinkwater, 2005). These are the women who have been deprived of their rights of to be educated, to be employed and to own property.

According to the United Nations Millennium Campaign (from CARE, 2008), the following statistics reflect a very negative situation for women:

- “*Women work two-thirds of the world’s working hours.*” *Women spend a majority of their time raising the children, cooking, maintaining the house, and managing household chores. Yet their work is considered low status because it is not recognized as meaningful work. All of these things are expected from women, but they are not rewarded monetarily.*
- “*Women earn only 10% of the world’s income*” because of the limitations caused by the environment and gender inequality.

- “Women make up two-thirds of the estimated 876 million adults worldwide who cannot read or write”. A girl’s education is considered frivolous since women are expected to work at home, i.e., maintaining the household.

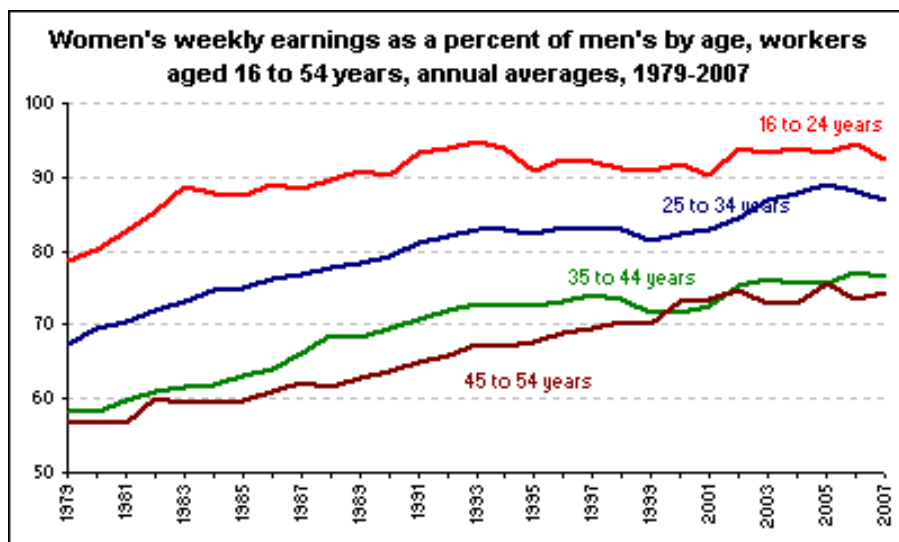
These are the background factors which have led the United Nations to work for women empowerment (i.e., gender equality and women empowerment in education, employment and political participation).

Gender Inequality and Lack of Empowerment in the Workplace

In the United States, sexual discrimination was outlawed by the implementation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. “The provisions of this civil rights act forbade discrimination on the basis of sex as well as race in hiring, promoting, and firing.” (National Archives and Records Administration) While discrimination is illegal and socially unacceptable in employment practices in the United States, there is still much work to do to achieve real equality for both minorities and women.

The gender wage (or pay) gap is the difference in the earning between men and women (Blau and Khan, 2006). In 1998, the pay ratio in the United States increased to 79.7% from 74.5% in 1989 and 63.2% in 1979 (Blau and Khan, 2006). “The women’s-to-men’s earnings ratio among 35- to 44-year-olds rose from 58 percent in 1979 to 77 percent in 2007, and the ratio for 45- to 54-year-olds increased from 57 percent to 75 percent” (<http://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2008/oct/wk4/art03.htm>). Also, between 1979 and 2007, the earnings gap between women and men narrowed for most age groups. For more information, see Bureau of Labor Statistics Report 1008 entitled “Highlights of Women’s Earnings in 2007.”

Chart 1: Women’s Earnings as a Percentage of Men’s, 1979-2007



Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (2007). Retrieved December 9, 2008 from <http://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2008/oct/wk4/art03.htm>.

The answer to gender equality in the workplace is removing environmental and organizational barriers regardless of an employee’s gender or race. A diverse workforce can provide a competitive advantage as demonstrated by women entrepreneurs.

The Glass Ceiling

The term glass ceiling was coined by Katherine Lawrence and Marianne Schreiber of Hewlett-Packard in 1979. The term glass ceiling refers to situations where the advancement of a qualified

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person within the hierarchy of an organization is stopped at a lower level because of some form of discrimination, most commonly sexism or racism. Glass ceiling is defined as “the phenomenon whereby women do quite well in the labor market up to a market after which there is an effective limit on their prospects Albrecht et al., 2003, pp.146).”

Women Entrepreneurs

The huge growth in numbers of female entrepreneurs may be partially attributed to the glass ceiling. Women are making small advances in the corporate structure. However, women are also making significant headway in owning their own business. Women-owned businesses grew 28% between 1997 and 2004. Some women are starting their own businesses right after completing their college education. Others leave the corporate world to start businesses. Women are interested in entrepreneurial endeavors because they offer decision-making opportunities as well as the potential for financial self-sufficiency (Klein, 2006).

Veira (2008, p.96) notes that 25 percent of the entrepreneurs are women, and 75 percent are men. It is possible that women are better entrepreneurs than men because only 14.6% of the entrepreneurs who go bankrupt are female, and 85.4% of them are men. These figures help explain the changing role of women in employment. Also, these statistics are evidence of the fact that when women are empowered, they are able to positively impact their work environment.

Gender Inequality and Lack of Empowerment in Politics

Ake (2000) believes that “Democracy is never given it is always taken (pp.7).” Yet this is difficult for women who are undereducated or uneducated, who are of lesser social status than men, and/or whose religious laws do not affirm them as equal. In Africa, women cannot enter into politics because they are not qualified in terms of education because of low economic and social status (Foster, 1993; Geisler, 1995). In some instances, women are prevented from entering politics because religious laws discriminate against women (House-Midamba 1996; Yoon, 2001). Perhaps others see the increased empowerment of women in politics as values or heritage issue because it is antithetical to generational patrimony (Lindberg, 2004; Tripp, 2001).

As of 2005, women in the United States made up 51 percent of the population. Yet, in 2008, only 75 women are in the House of Representatives and 16 women hold Senate seats. Combined, women comprise 17 percent of the U.S. Congress. Clearly, strides are being made toward equality, but there is a long way to go before women are equally represented in the Senate, House of representatives, and boardrooms across the country (Capital Advantage, 2008).

The glass ceiling may have been shattered. However, in recent news, it seems to remain intact. In 2008, two women competed for the highest offices of the United States. New York Senator, Hilary Clinton was a presidential nominee, and Alaska Governor, Sarah Palin was a vice presidential nominee. Members of the media continuously questioned their abilities to handle the demands of the offices for which they were contenders. Also, certain issues were raised that were not raised with their male counterparts. For example, some of the issues for Governor Palin included questions regarding her ability to simultaneously handle family and vice presidential responsibilities as well as the amount of money spent on clothing and attire. Harris & Frerking (2008) emphasize that such questions would not have been asked of a male candidate.

Suggested Actions to Reduce Gender Inequality and Increase the Empowerment of Women

“Be the change you want to see in the world”

(Dr. Sonia Taneja)

It is incumbent upon all people to understand what equality and empowerment are and the reason that they are essential for all human beings. Once they have that knowledge, they then have the responsibility to help transform their respective parts of society so that equality and empowerment are realities. These are people issues and societal issues, not just women's issues. However, if women want to have equality and be empowered, they must first believe they are worthy and stand up for justice. Their husbands, fathers, and mothers must also stand up and make society better for future generations as well as this one. When contemplating equality and empowerment, each person must say, "I will be the change that I want to see in the world".

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon says that improving empowerment and equality for women "requires all of us . . . to work for enduring change in values and attitudes . . . transforming relations between women and men, at all levels of society. It also requires . . . governments, international organizations, civil society and the private sector to work as partners . . . to ensure that women and girls enjoy their full rights and take up their rightful place in society" (<http://www.un.org> 2007). The following actions are suggested by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, and he says that we must simultaneously move forward on several fronts at once:

- Ensuring that men take on a greater role in household and family care;
- Challenging traditions and customs, stereotypes and harmful practices that stand in the way of women and girls;
- Ensuring that women have access to education and health care, property and land;
- Investing in infrastructure to reduce time burdens for women and girls;
- Promoting human rights and security, including freedom from violence;
- Integrating gender issues into the follow-up to UN resolutions and decisions — including the work of recently established bodies such as the Peace Building Commission and the Human Rights Council (www.un.org).

In his November 25, 2008 remarks at the UNIFEM (United Nation's Development Fund for Women) High-Level Event: "United Voices Say No to Violence against Women" (<http://www.un.org> 2007). Ban Ki-moon reiterated his commitment to freedom from violence. He said that we must act now because every day, women are beaten and abused in their homes, girls are abused and raped at schools, women and girls are trafficked (i.e., sold) across borders, and sexual violence is used as a weapon of war. He encouraged greater social mobilization as he reiterated his call on government and other leaders and people throughout society to say no to violence against women.

CARE 2008 has moved from a simple needs approach to a rights approach. The difference is that the rights approach:

- Insists that poverty is neither natural nor inevitable, but has roots in political and economic decisions;
- Helps us identify the structural and societal causes of poverty and marginalization;
- Aims to address relations between those who wield power and those who do not;
- Provides a means of strengthening people's capacities to claim and exercise their rights; and
- Clarifies authorities duties to those they serve.

Some authors (Bell, 2006; Masini, 1994) believe that when it comes to change, women are the first to adapt to changing circumstances because of their innate quality of being creative and imaginative.

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Creativity is the artistic outcome of a process of profound feeling which may not be perceived but can only be felt. Women are able to adapt to changes at the macro level (i.e., in politics, economics, the environment, science, and technology). They are also able to adapt to the effects of the macro-level changes as well as at the micro-level (i.e., in her household). Studies on the effects of such changes on women's lives at the macro-level and the micro-level were conducted in three areas (textile industries in Argentina and Brazil, female migration in Sri Lanka, and women working in factories in China). This had a negative impact on the women's working lives at macro-level but no impact on their family and household lives (micro-level) because of the transformation of the textile industry in both Argentina and Brazil to more sophisticated mechanical changes (Masini, 1994, pp.53).

The challenges and questions are difficult, and the answers are not easy. However, they are possible. Women must step up and challenge the status quo (Tripp, 2001). Leaders of nations, businesses, educational institutions, healthcare organizations, and other institutions and organizations must make the goals of gender equality and the empowerment of women an integral part of their strategic and tactical (operational) plans. Then they must measure the extent to which they have achieved their goals. Leaders in the United Nations and other world entities as well as national, state and local entities have spoken about the need for gender equality and the empowerment of women. Now it is time for action, i.e., the execution of the strategic and tactical plans.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As long as members of societies or sub-groups in societies permit or enable the subjugation of other members or sub-groups, gender equality in those sub-groups and societies will remain an illusive dream, not a real goal for which strategies and tactics can be executed. So it is incumbent on members of societies and sub-groups in societies to make strong commitments to equality and to encourage their governmental, business, educational, religious, and other organizations to establish legislative, procedural and other requirements for equality. The United Nations Secretary-General and leaders of various nations have made public commitments to women's empowerment and equality. It is now time for them and other organizational leaders to establish goals that are specific, measurable, and time-based in order that they may subsequently establish executable strategies and tactics. Until and unless gender equality and the empowerment of women become a reality, society will suffer the consequences in terms of uneducated and undereducated women, violence against females, poverty, and under-representation of women in decision-making positions.

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