



Reflections on Women's Empowerment: An Ethnographic Case Study of Women Victims in an NGO in Delhi

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ABSTRACT Empowerment of women is a much discussed subject in recent times and has gained a significant concern within the field of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and in the developmental discourse in general. A number of NGOs in India have developed strategies with a mission to empower women by organizing miscellaneous self-improvement programs. Women empowerment is one of the essential tools to fight against gender disparity in our society and help women exercise equal status with men in all aspects of life. This paper attempts to highlight the programs conducted by a Delhi based NGO as part of empowerment to improve the lives of those women who have been victims of gender-based violence. Qualitative methods have been employed for the collection of data and its analysis. A total number of eighteen participants including ten women clients and eight NGO professionals along with experts engaged in conducting the programs participated in the study. The clients who were staying at the shelter home during the fieldwork took part in the programs. This paper critically analyses the existence of power dynamics between the professionals and clients that thwarted the aspects of empowerment. This paper also explains how power dynamic has influenced the interaction that effectively weakened and partially failed to serve the purpose of empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

The term 'empowerment' is commonly used as a word within the field of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and in the discourse of development in general. Empowerment has become a 'buzzword' in the developmental discourse and likely to be widely used and abused (Batliwala 2010). However, empowerment of women can be considered as a multidimensional approach including personal, economic, financial and political sphere in individual, family and community level (Mahmud et al. 2012). Women can achieve self-reliance not only in one domain of life but in other areas too, which indicates women's empowerment as a multidimensional process (Mahmud et al. 2012; Tsikata and Darkwah 2014). The process of empowerment lies in the ability to access resources to bring effective changes in lives. Empowerment therefore, clearly signifies a course of action in which one can shape decisions with the help of resources and agencies that are not otherwise imposed in a given situation (Kabeer 2001).

A plethora of NGOs¹ in India have taken up empowerment as a strategic approach for developing plans and policies. They have focused on upliftment of women to acquire freedom and self-confidence to enjoy equal status in different

walks of life like employment, education, health, decision making in the family, community and state level (Panda 2000). The pursuit of empowering women has become the need of the hour to enable them understand and exercise their basic human rights. Since gender based discrimination is considered as an impediment that infringes the elementary rights of women, it is essential for them to emancipate themselves in order to command their own lives (Jabeen and Jabeen 2013).

A number of NGOs in India have developed strategies with a mission to empower women by organizing miscellaneous self-improvement multiple training programs to help women to get rid of inhibitions and associate themselves with effective actions to bring harmony in life (Patel and Dubey 2010). NGOs' extensive involvement on the need of women including education, economic independence, and health issues to enable them to access these basic requirements can unequivocally contribute to women empowerment (Margaret and Kala 2013). The operational aspects of NGOs should focus to meet goals to be able to function with efficacy. NGOs' are capable of performing as pivotal agencies in augmenting awareness on addressing issues related to gender disparity and misuse of women's rights that are otherwise thwarted (Muth-

usami 2014). Gender disparity and oppression of women juxtaposed the plight of unequal opportunities in the domain of education, economy and other areas. A study on the role of NGOs on women's empowerment in Uttar Pradesh laid stress on a series of interventional actions in health and literacy level of women. Beside the considerable efforts of NGOs to make women self-efficient, the purpose of women's empowerment is yet to gain attainments as a whole (Tauffiqu et al. 2015).

In an attempt to look into the facts of emerging empowerment programs and how it helped women in becoming empowered, Chaudhuri (2018) learned in her fieldwork that awareness programs and legal pedagogies adopted by NGOs were valuable for women to break silence and stand against the abusive behavior. Bangladesh in this context has shown an exemplary triumph in mobilizing rural women governed by NGOs in villages. These NGOs have played an imperative role in empowering women that includes women entrepreneurship, providing education, advancement of health sectors for women and reducing child mortality rate (Chaity 2018).

A handful of articles have focused on women's empowerment on individual level to bring positive changes in the society all together. Over the years, researchers started focusing on both micro and macro level approaches as well as an intermediate level that shows various attempts to empower women (Huis et al. 2017). An individualistic way of empowerment generally intended to improve the strength of people but often overlooked the root cause of distressing issues embedded in the social structure (Pease 2002). There are other perspectives of empowerment. Coming to the definition of empowerment, Anderson (1996) notices that the definition of empowerment significantly asserts professional activities where professionals play the key role in deciding the need for people including improving and framing tools for empowerment activities. Mostly this whole concept shapes a contradictory approach towards dedication to empowerment and the professional discourse. Professional knowledge gives the advantage to gain certain specific qualifications in the concerned field to do work more accurately. While professionals are expected to be completely skilled, their efficacy that produces power can suppress their clients which can possibly disrupt the aim of the service (Hartman 1992).

The power display is captured by Simon (1990) as he went on to explain that there is a chance to weaken empowering actions owing to the fact that professionals are located in a powerful position due to their professional skills. Even though there is an altruistic concern to empower the deprived, the connection between professionals and their empowering activities is often guided by power. If the supporting activities are taken as the process of empowerment by the professionals, it is not impossible for clients to feel uncomfortable in the environment. From a feminist poststructuralist standpoint, the notion of empowerment is conflicting in its nature in various fields of empowerment that shapes professionals to be oppressive. They can be seen in the educational sector, social welfare and community outreach programs together with feminists. Wise (2002) argued in this regard to the empowering actions that 'what if I think a woman is oppressed or not? What does empowerment mean here-the imposition of my set of values over her?' This is where the goals and practices of empowerment exist in the hierarchical power relations between the social workers and clients² (Solas 1996).

Objectives

This paper aims to explain the strategies taken up by the NGO to empower distressed women. This paper attempts to argue the impact of the programs aimed for women's empowerment. With the growing awareness on women empowerment the author aims to examine the existing power dynamics between the NGO professionals and clients.

METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of the paper, data has been collected from both primary and secondary resources. Primary data was collected by conducting a rigorous ethnographic fieldwork in the studied NGO. The fieldwork was implemented by adopting in-depth interviews and observation method. By and large non-participant observation was implemented to collect data. Methods of data collection and analysis were thoroughly qualitative in nature. This paper has primarily focused on in-depth narratives of the phenomenon from the perspectives of the respondents³. The secondary information was supported by

various books, journals, articles and newspapers. The data which is exclusively used in this paper was collected during the fieldwork for the purpose of Ph.D. research from end of 2016 to mid-2017. The fieldwork was carried out in an NGO located in Delhi that worked for distressed women of gender-based violence with an attempt to promote zero tolerance against violence towards women.

A total number of eighteen participants consisting of ten women clients and eight NGO professionals including experts who facilitated the empowerment programs had participated in the study. The women clients were selected on the basis of their stay at the shelter home⁴ during the time of the programs conducted.

Considering the sensitivity of the researched subject, ethical responsibilities were the key concern before conducting fieldwork. In order to protect the identity of women clients, real names were not used in the paper. The paper has also considered confidentiality as a means of respecting the privacy of clients. Each respondent whether it was a professional or a client treated with respect and dignity throughout the course of the fieldwork. Integrity and honesty of the research were ensured.

RESULTS

Clients were both married and unmarried women. The range of age among clients was between eighteen and forty years and the NGO professionals belonged to the age group between twenty-five and seventy-five years. The demographic profile of clients documented by the organization revealed their lower socio-economic status. A total number of ten clients participated in the study of which one respondent was a rape survivor while the rest of them were the victims of domestic violence⁵. Some of the clients came in contact with the organization through women helpline number 181⁶. Personal contact with the organization in the past also acted as a source of information through which clients approached the organization to seek help. The programs were designed and conducted by recognizing individual's need as well as group interest. But the NGO professionals were the ultimate decision makers for conducting these programs. The programs in terms of workshops discussed below explain the strategies undertaken by the NGO.

Workshops Conducted by the Organization

Self-defense

The first workshop was set on self-defense training and continued for a period of one month. Experts were invited to facilitate the workshop from the respective domain. The workshop was interactive and participants were seen to have an interest in learning techniques pertaining to self-defense. All the residents of the shelter home from youth to elderly women took part in the workshop. They performed, as advised and listened carefully to everything demonstrated and explained by the trainers. Each self-preventive skill such as how to predict, identify, beware and protect oneself by adopting different safety precautions was demonstrated. The trainers also addressed the issue of saying 'no' and stand up against any objectionable behavior as an effective defense mechanism. During the sessions, it has been noticed that despite participants' opinion about the kind of techniques they wanted to learn was prominent, their needs however, were guided by professionals. In the training sessions, instructions were predominantly given by the professionals together with experts. Therefore, under the circumstances, the sessions were at times, seemed to be unilaterally handled by experts and professionals than making it interactive and active participation.

Legal Awareness

Since the organization mainly worked on the issues of gender-based violence against women, the professionals set plans for another dimension of empowering activity that covered educating them with various legal perspectives related to violence against women. They appointed a lawyer who had been engaged in handling legal matters of clients on the part of the NGO for many years. Initially the participants felt shy to share their experiences. After one or two sessions encouragement by the expert was the catalyst that helped them feel comfortable and share experiences. The facilitator⁷ of the workshop believed that sharing experiences could be an effective tool for them to gain an understanding in legal dimensions as they were provided legal assistance in the past. This workshop was inter-

active and stimulating for the participants. The legal dimensions discussed in the workshop were determined by professionals and the workshop facilitator, that is, the lawyer.

Theatre

Storytelling through stage performance was one more addition as a site for self-improvement. They were driven by strength to share their stories on stage by means of acting. The idea was developed by professionals and that inspired participants. Sharing experiences of violence and their struggle was the key theme for the play. Other themes such as patriarchy and gendered roles for women were also touched upon. Regardless of the fact that there were few residents who made their involvement in the play, the overall atmosphere at the shelter home was filled with positivity and strength after their engagement in theatrical programs. Their performance in the theatres in Delhi in collaboration with a theatre group was subsumed as an emancipatory act.

Other Programs

Besides the aforementioned programs, clients had been engaged in celebrating cultural and religious festivals too as part of self-improvement activities at the shelter home. From the perspectives of the professionals, engaging women to celebrate festivals was aspiring as this could bring joy and happiness in their lives. Festivals brought the warmth in their behavior and lowered stress induced emotions. As a part of the empowering activities these celebrations played a pivotal role in stimulating their self-confidence and make them feel to be a part of the society. Since they were not attached to their families, through the festivities, professionals attempted to regain mental stability of clients and ensure that they must not feel unwanted by the society because of their past experiences. From commemorating National Republic day, Independence Day to celebration of festivals such as *Eid* and *Deepavali* were included not only in terms of enjoyment and belongingness but as a curriculum under empowerment activities too. Various artistic works including painting, handmade crafts, making earrings, greeting cards were employed as a healing mechanism to overcome and recover from traumatic past experiences. Providing learning opportunities of

handmade items has been observed as a method to foster income-generating activities as well.

DISCUSSION

The approaches toward the empowerment of women reflected in the activities were contradictory in its own nature. Professionals defined empowerment as an ability to make choices and independent decision. But in practical terms, their approach was loosely connected with their actions. They were more likely to supervise and influence the mental outlook of women rather than helping them to come out of uncertainty and ambiguity by improving their cognitive skills. Major decisions of these women pertinent to their lives were governed and controlled by professionals at several occasions. For instance, an unmarried pregnant client was persuaded to give up on her child for adoption against their will. The infant was taken away from her and given to another NGO associated with the procedure of adoption. She was an active participant in the programs. Other clients who participated in the programs were often advised to give up the idea of divorce for the sake of children, husband and family members and for their own well-being. Their well-being was decided by the professionals since they were held responsible to solve their problems. Therefore, on one hand, clients were equipped with self-confidence to devise their own decisions while on the other hand, making decision or choice such as divorce would be asked to decline and assisted for mediation with husbands. In short, instead of helping them enjoy their voice, the effect of professionals to influence their voices was evident.

The clients appeared to have accustomed with the controlling interaction as they have had always considered them the least knowledgeable in comparison to professionals. This mutual understanding had submerged in their behavior which could be the manifestation of the authoritative image such NGOs represent. The least the NGO could deliver a positive impact was through self-improvement programs. Those programs were able to make a positive impact in the lives of those clients who went through severe traumatic experiences to recover from anxiety. The clients were physically and mentally unfit to think and make decisions as stated by the professionals. Needless to say that within the

paradigm of self-efficacy activities, the professionals maintained their superiority to influence clients' decisions.

The paradoxical image emerged from the abovementioned cases imply a relatively hierarchical relation in their interaction. The NGO was interested in organizing various training programs that intended to help these women to have voice on their own. But in reality, they were silenced by socially conditioned rules and norms supported by the NGO. The normative belief system of NGO professionals crafted their understanding of being educated, prudent and therefore, capable of changing other people's lives. With this approach they assessed the existing impediments of women empowerment in the society and classified themselves as the savior of the underprivileged and downtrodden women. Their actions were regulated by the notion that many of these clients were unable or couldn't produce any independent rational decision by themselves. They not only considered themselves well-educated to guide clients' empowerment and govern their development but also powerful enough to guide their development. Although participation of women in programs can be highlighted as a strategic approach to promote empowerment and improve their lives, but the existing power hierarchy played a great role in the course of empowerment. As a matter of fact, the impact of these programs was limited because of the presence of power dynamics within the professional-client relationship. The hierarchical structure restricted clients to figure out what they wanted to pursue in their lives. The professionals intertwined clients' cognizance and intellect with academic standards. Educational inadequacy in terms of formal education has been considered to have confined them in building knowledge and developing skills. They in fact, imposed their idea on clients that they needed their guidance to achieve a better life. Considering the way through which clients were guided, slow movement towards manipulating individual preference on life was observed. Careful listening and following lessons without raising any question were found prevalent among clients. The submissive trait exemplifies the binary opposition of dominant and dominated. Their repressive behavior was self-regulatory and a natural phenomenon in the eyes of the professionals.

Kabeer (2001) has emphasized 'empowerment' as a process to acquire ability to make choices which was denied in earlier context. She has inter-linked three major components with the concept of empowerment: 'agency', which depicts the way of enacting the making of choices; 'resources' refer to the channel through which agency functions and 'achievements' is the outcome of the agency. Drawing from the framework of Resource-Agency-Achievement approach to women empowerment in the present context, resources were the organization and its interventional programs to empower clients. Agency referred to the ability of clients to make choices to govern their lives. Achievement referred to the outcomes of the programs conducted by the NGO to enable women to exercise the right to freedom of expression and make necessary choices. The clients were able to utilize resources for their prosperity but the possibility to become the agents in the process of change was thwarted. Simultaneously it is also important to take note of the nuances of underlying power outplayed the discourse of the empowerment.

The altruistic philosophy among professionals is closely embedded in the differences based on divergence of the class which in one way or another has made them believe expert in their field and clients as slow in growth or underprivileged. The segregation of power is driven by unequal power hierarchy and class system in society. This is where the organization stumbled upon to establish the notion of empowerment 'as an exercise rather displayed possession of power' (Rowlands 1998; Parpart et al. 2002). The approach on empowerment which engages in the process to enable women take control and ownership of their lives (Strandberg 2002) was diminished by the controlling attitude of the professionals. Empowerment is not only attributed to conceive power in decision making authority but it guides people to believe in their ability to make decisions. The organizational activities concerning empowerment was primarily meant to serve by the needs of clients. Under these circumstances their strategic approach in fact, insinuates the link between gaining funds and whom they were financially accountable for. The more they tried to construct the idea of empowering activities for these women, the more there were chances to catch the eye of affluent people and institutions for donation for the organization. This implication advocates the de-

sire to enhance power in the competition with other NGOs and acquire funds. This critical approach serves the connotation that the goal of NGOs is to secure and raise their economic and social capitals (van Aaken et al. 2013). This auxiliary goal for conducting empowering activities to gain economic and social capital from foreign and national agencies was completely camouflaged. Additionally, in the name of the betterment for the women by securing donations was another unseen strategy that indicated proliferation of power. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power substantiates the ulterior motive of organizing the empowerment programs. According to Bourdieu, social capital is supported by theories of symbolic power in which the structural restraints and unequal access to resources is grounded on class, gender and race, yielding capital both economic and social led the organization to materialize power (Bourdieu 1986).

Another aspect of argument is based on Foucauldian discourse of power. In this discourse, Foucault (1980) has put forth power as not possessed by an individual or groups but exists everywhere. According to him, Power is exercised within a position and importantly when exercising power, not the subject in the position. For instance, an individual may have a possibility of being unaware of the powerful position she holds but she could not control the outcomes of her actions (Nilsson 2008). Similarly, within social work power exists between the helper and the client. In this regard, Skau (2007) has argued that power may be recognized as a negative word, but it embroiled within social work practice in which helping part 'could' appear but does not have to. Social workers therefore, are contended talking about help they provide than the power they use (Skau 2007). Understanding the ever present exercise of power, it is possible to surmise the interventional practices in the form of empowerment as nothing but ensuring clients' over all well-being. Even if it was so, it is undeniable that the role of professionals was entitled as experts to control and devise the empowerment tools, while the clients played the role of mere recipients.

The distribution of power between the professionals and clients was identical to the patriarchal power dynamics embedded in the society. It must be borne in mind that clients were subjected to the disproportionate use of power by men. The exertion of power by professionals

once again entangled clients within the labyrinth of unequal power relation that unequivocally recognized them as less knowledgeable. If there is any difference in exercising power that can be viewed as the direct exertion of power by men through violence and the latter as an invisible power to influence clients' behavior. As a consequence, efforts in setting positive life goals by professionals fell short in an unfair distribution of power that impeded their freedom of choice. The analysis brings out the irony of the interventional mechanisms as an anticipatory approach that aims to mobilize clients to have their own voice and individual space. Their internal struggles against male domination along with the NGO's power exertion cast a shadow to their individual self-identity. By and large, the NGO had treated women with the authority which was very unlikely to perceive by outsiders. Though the professionals were able to reach out to the clients to deliver the meaning of empowerment and the importance of one's own voice, they failed to serve the purpose of empowerment.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the paper stressed on the practice and the impact of empowering approaches undertaken by the organization to determine whether or not it was able to attain its objectives. The paper has been able to interpret the incomprehensible hierarchical relationship between the professionals and clients. The analysis reveals the obscurity in the interactions that has effectively weakened and partially failed to deliver the purpose of empowerment. The critical perspective of empowerment considerably adds value to the understanding of the complex nature and defies the process of empowerment. The aspects of empowerment challenge with and go further the existing literature that engage in a course of thought and hypothesize empowerment as simple, easily attainable and linear process of action. Amid the trust and popularity, the organization gained lately, the professionals are expected to eliminate the subtle presence of hierarchy between them and clients to work together towards empowerment. When it comes to the empowerment, it can be achieved without creating hierarchy and partiality between the one who helped and those who are being helped.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the paper following recommendations were drawn to the NGO to meet goals towards women's empowerment:

The NGO professionals should free themselves from nuances of power dynamics in their actions otherwise the purpose of empowerment will remain incomplete. Moreover, they must recognize and understand the loophole that lies within the structures which dampen the entire process of empowerment.

It is necessary for professionals to maintain a cordial and non-hierarchical relationship with clients. They should not highlight the societal class structure within the working environment when they are associated with clients. Rather they should uproot the existing dictatorial personality due to their privileged societal position in professional discourse.

Despite there were rigorous workshops were organized based on various social issues, participants were not seen in the process of practicing anything they learned. The NGO should pay attention towards clients that they get a fair chance to implement learned skills into practice.

Lastly, women who had undergone training; were unable to access the freedom of choice. The professionals must ensure that they are empowered enough to speak their mind.

LIMITATIONS

The limitations of this study should be presented outright. First and foremost, data produced in the study was based primarily on in-depth informal conversations with the respondents. The presence of professionals during the interview with the clients interrupted them to open up and share experiences. Another issue this research faced was the lack of secondary resources to support the present scenario. Finally, the inadequate research sample could not support the quantitative analysis of the paper.

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NOTES

- 1 A non-governmental organization (NGO) is a non-profit entity of voluntary citizen free from authority of government
- 2 The word 'client' in this paper indicates women who have been victims of gender-based violence and approached the organization to seek assistance and help.
- 3 Respondents referred to both professionals and clients who participated in the research.
- 4 Shelter home is a temporary home for people in crisis. Women in need of safety, legal aid, accommodation, economic and medical treatment were provided temporary stay at the shelter home by the organization.
- 5 Domestic violence in India under the protection of women from domestic violence act 2005 is defined as an act of physical, verbal, sexual, economic emotional and psychological abuse committed against women by intimate partner or family member sharing the same household.
- 6 The 181 is a nationwide helpline number for women in distress introduced by the Delhi government in 2012 under Delhi Commission for Women.
- 7 Facilitator is a person who uses skills and expertise to keep a group discussion reciprocal by sharing knowledge and make sure that all the participants have a chance in expressing views.

APPENDIX

- Deepavali- Deepavali is a festival among Hindus celebrated in autumn every year with lights as a symbol of good over evil.
- Eid- Eid is an annual religious festivity celebrated by Muslims at the end of Ramadan, an important Islamic holy month.

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