

Rethinking the Concept of Economic Empowerment of Women from a South-Asian Perspective

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Abstract: The primary concern of this research is the documentation of the experiences of economic empowerment of women and gender relations under neoliberal policy framework as they intersect with social and economic discourse; directly shaping the lives of women in Pakistan. In this pursuit domestic servants were taken as a unit of analysis. Triangular approach was adopted to collect data through observation, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Thematic content technique was used to analyse the interviews and discussions. The paper highlights that employment does not necessarily translate into empowerment for all women. The respondents of this research despite being “economically empowered” show no desire to challenge patriarchy. They want social protection, food, and education for their children through a relationship of cooperation and understanding with their husbands. The paper calls for a more nuanced understanding of not only empowerment but also challenges the liberal framework that links women’s empowerment to employment.

Key Words Gender equality, delusional Empowerment, Public-Private dichotomy, Power relations, co-operation, submission.

Introduction

Economic empowerment is the most influential route for women to achieve their potential and advance their rights (Golla et al. 2011). South-East Asia is the most heavily populated and amongst the poorest regions in the world. It faces enormous social, economic and health challenges, including pervasive inequality, violence, political instability and high burden of diseases (Niaz and Hassan, 2006). Women are severely affected by poverty because of barriers to education and employment. Pakistani society is patriarchal; hence women have almost no access to land and financial resources. Therefore, in order to improve the social status of women and to bring about change, advocacy for gender-fair development must be home grown. It is not just a matter of entering the spaces between the weave, but also of growing in that space and evolving from the vast and rich fabric of everyday life (Arooj, et al., 1999). It is obvious that the debate on rights can't be raised by Muslim women in the absence of empowerment. Whereas Economic Empowerment which is perceived as outside

employment is in principle a multidimensional and multifaceted process, when linked with the liberal paradigm. It is largely immaterial and perceived as bringing about psychological change by providing sense of independence and improving self-esteem and social change by having lesser arguments at home (Shaheed and Mumtaz, 1987). This achievement of self-worth not only helps them in better prioritization of available options and resources in combating the risks of poverty but also to have right ratio of participation by both genders. It has often been related with enabling women to spend a life with dignity, equal rights and opportunities and social justice (Esplen and Brody, 2007). Pakistan is a developing country where the consequences of poverty are great. As per (Narasaiah, 2007) Women experience greater poverty and transmit their disadvantages more readily to their children, thus perpetuating the poverty cycle. At the same time, they are better able than men to protect children from the consequences of poverty. In order to break the vicious circle of poverty, women must have mere access to assets and services, infrastructure design must be made to benefit women and employment opportunities must be created and recognition be given to their work. The policies of World Bank for the development of women defines gender equality which leads to growth in income and productivity. It is highly intertwined with neoliberal ideology which works on the principle of privatization and liberalisation. Neoliberal doctrine provides equal opportunity to every individual in the presence of free market system (Hayek, 1944). It encourages meritocracy irrespective of gender. This equality does not define only equal opportunity, but it requires equality in 'resources, endowments, agency, and voice'. And all this could be achieved through modernisation of institution and culture which requires structural adjustment (Prügl, 2016). For neoliberal's empowerment is the 'capacity to make choice' and 'individual autonomy'. "The capacity to make choice' is a good paradigm but real empowerment achieved when the individual does not have to make constant choices to survive. The issue of making critical choices daily portrays an environment full 'of uncertainties, risks, unpredictability, and lack of guarantee' (Cörüt, 2022, p.124).

In reality, human beings are shaped by various often contradictory challenging discourses, expressing numerous aspects of identification and realize both their endurance and their deliberate use of multiple dialogues (Ahmad, 2010). The results of different studies are inconclusive regarding achievement of empowerment due to outside employment. The diversity in the opinion of women is due to difference in their working hours and their household duties and their acknowledgement in the family as well as in the society (Saigol, 2011). Moreover, Women's movements, feminist researchers and civil society organizations in Asia have expressed deep dissatisfaction over the current policies of economic development as they have failed to incorporate women's concerns (Kelkar & Yunxian, 2007). Nussbaum emphasized that liberty is not just a matter of having rights on paper, it requires being in a material (economically sufficient) position to exercise those rights. And this requires (material) resources (Nussbaum, Women's capability and Social Justice, 2000). I agree power shapes lived experiences and hearing the voices of those concerned is vital to informing future actions around the issue. It is their way of life and understanding of prevailing culture. The development scholars want women to detach from hegemonic ideologies but isn't it they themselves imposing a hegemonic discourse? Local voices are important, and no development policy will be successful without acknowledging the local discourse and providing them a space in the global discourse. There is a dire need for "connecting the individual body to the global body, and the need for multifaceted analysis and policy work" (Ozyegin, 2015, 179). Henceforth, the core idea as Nussbaum (2002) explained, seems to be that of the human being as a dignified free being who shapes his / her own life rather than being passively shaped or pushed around by the world in the manner of a flock or herd animal" (123-124).

In this regard, Mohanty (1988, p.68) throws light on the subject categories of women and claims that they might have “subordinate, powerful, marginal, central, or otherwise, vis-a-vis particular social and power networks.” These subjective positions are based on their social set up, social class, ethnic background and so forth. To provide a window of understanding between the genders relations two questions explored in this scholarship:

Does the idea of imposed empowerment, expand their strategic choices by increasing their well-being?

Despite the weakening notion of male domination due to neo liberalism, why do women want to reproduce their own subordination?

In this regard, a micro level case study has been conducted on female domestic servants.

Background to the Study

South- Asia is the most heavily populated and amongst the poorest regions in the world. It faces enormous social, economic and health challenges, including pervasive inequality, violence, political instability and high burden of diseases (Niaz & Hassan, 2006). Third World Women as a homogeneous powerless group often located as implicit victims of socio-economic systems (Mohanty , 1984). Such representation certainly holds true for Pakistani women, who like many other third world women, are often perceived as monolithic subjects living a historical lives, a perception I suggest is particularly prevalence for them as apart from belonging to the developing world, the majority of them are also Muslim, another label that seems to facilitate many to forget that women’s lives are historically and culturally heterogeneous images of Pakistani women (Ahmad, 2010). Moreover, they are living in a socio-cultural setup where men are also facing socio-economic challenges due to neoliberal-capitalism. A very little scholarly attention has been paid on the plight of working-class males, due to state policies which mostly follow the suggested austerity measures by neoliberals, the subjective position of their men is also marginalized.

According to United Nations report, Pakistan is the fifth most populated country. The population of Pakistan is projected at 225,199,937 or 225.200 million as of July 1, 2021 (statistics times, 2021). “National CPI Inflation on year-on-year basis increased to 13.4 percent in April 2022 from 12.7 percent in previous month. It stood at 11.1 percent in the corresponding month of last year. It was recorded 1.0 percent in the corresponding month of last year” (State Bank of Pakistan, 2022, p.1). The growing urbanization, rising food prices, and low wage structure has forced many women to join labour market. Moreover, nearly 70 percent of working women in the informal sector work below the minimum wage (Mumtaz, 2014). From the last two decades, the development process and subsequent rise in work burden of professional class have encouraged the entrance of unskilled women (without technical education) in labor market. This in turn has produced demand for domestic workers to carry out works, previously performed by housewives (Sinha, 2012).

Domestic servants are commonly known as *kaamwali* which means a female who performs domestic work. If she is an older lady she is called as *khala* or *maasi* (aunt) in respect. Though *maasi* has now become a derogatory slang for a hag. Domestic services in Pakistan are based on an informal verbal contractual arrangement between the employer and the worker. There is no written contract and domestic workers find jobs by word of mouth through friends, neighbors and relatives who are domestic workers in different residential areas. There are very few employment agencies facilitating domestic workers. There is no fixed wage structure and it varies according to localities, economic status

of employer and the type of work performed (Shahid, 2014). For part time job, they receive 3000 rupees per month and for full time work which starts from 9:00 AM till 3:00 PM or 4:00 PM depending upon workload receives 15,000 to 20,000 rupees per month. The perception of 'man the provider' predominates in spite of the presence of local economies of scale who push many women to work for their survival (Weiss, 1986). In many cases, especially those who belong to the lower rung of the society, women have no preference for economic independence. Their marriages are endogamous and their husbands are mostly *deharridaar* (daily wage labourers) or vendors and mostly left unable to find work due to seasonal or cyclical recession or health conditions. Consequently, they share multiple layers of marginalization. In Pakistan therefore, empowerment literature became twisted, indissolubly and conflictingly, with the debates which are based on class structure. (Jamal, 2006). Therefore, in the absence of fewer marketable skills and needful education, the poor women unwillingly look for employment and finally reside in in-formal sector under highly discriminatory and exploitative circumstances.

The present study is based on fieldwork carried out on a slum at the outskirts of Margala Town.³ On the way towards the slum, there was a narrow bridge over a dirty stream, (clear water stream, turned into a drainage) across that there was a view of adjoining mud-houses. Domestic servants' houses were constructed in an un-planned manner, electric wires were dangling here and there, with no proper pavements to follow in the vicinity. Children were wearing shabby clothes, and due to narrow spaces, they were playing marbles outside of their houses in scorching sun during a hot day of June. Even in such living conditions, women were performing their daily errands.

Experiences of dis/Empowerment Despite Employment

During my fieldwork, I have interviewed twenty Domestic servants from informal sector, they account that due to in-formal sector they are earning lesser amount of money and shared distress over their lesser economic status. Studies also prove that the working women combined their income with their family, and hence had no distinguishable income of their own (Bell, 1974). The male members who get use to of women income, will make different excuses. Husband remains happy when wife participate in earnings. Most of the domestic servants believe their husbands are not happy with their employment but on the other side, they have no other choice as their wives are participating in the earnings and fulfilling the family's material needs. Nighat comes to work by observing purdah. Her husband is against her work. He has this opinion that outside world is not safe, as males are not saints. Shagufta a domestic servant is criticized by her husband. He taunts her and compares her with educated women working in formal sector and condemn her working status, by saying,

Tum konsa pahar tor keraiho, unhain dakho jo parilikhi hain, daftar jaati hain, tumhari kya oqat ha.
(You haven't toiled digging mountains, look at the educated women, they go to offices, what is your worth?)

Whereas in case of young un-married domestic servants, their parents continuously suffered from psychological turmoil. Naseeba who is Saima's mother and a domestic servant shared:

There is no one who wants to send his/her young, un-married daughter outside in this ruthless world, but due to economic vulnerability we have to take this hard decision.

³Margla Town is a village situated at the out-skirts of Islamabad, a federal capital of Pakistan.

Fatima felt that sometimes it is good to be busy in work; we forget our worries for the time being. We should work until we have energies.

Sonia has resumed work 10-15 days after delivery. She recalls,

There was no food at home. Although *Baji*(employer)sent me back home with some money, but I rejoined again after ten days due to no earning means.

Whereas for Shazia, outside employment provides a source of free mobility. As Shaista said,

He (her husband) does not allow me to step out (of home).

Shaista's family has Pashtun roots. Employment has provided her free movement. Major decisions related to family are in her hands. It has been observed that most of the decision either they are related to grocery shopping or decisions related to children's education, their food supplies are in the hands of woman. On interviewing an employer, these details came out, Employer has given salary to Nighat and spoke,

Do not spend the entire money on your way back home, save some for your kids. She replied delightfully that this is her own salary.

But in reality, she spends her earnings mostly on the tuition fees of her children. She shares,

I take care of my children diet by providing them sufficient fruits and dairy products

A very common theme which researcher has found out was the early marriages at a very tender age. Most of the domestic servants haven't finished their primary education. Mixed responses emerged about the provision of education to their children. Maina, whose entire family is working due to her husband's illness, and children are not interested in education.

Another respondent Shazia shares,

My consent wasn't sort at the time of my marriage.

When she was saying, there was a vibe of despair in her words and a spark in her eyes.

I will keep supporting my daughters for education until or unless they themselves lose interest and will only marry them off at a proper time because I don't want them to suffer like me.

Most of the female domestic servants want to provide education to their children irrelevant of their gender except one respondent Maqbool who had married off her elder daughter at a very young age. She also worked as housemaid. On the contrary, Maqbool is providing education to her two younger sons.

For survival in this world, education is a must.

Moghadam & Fahimi (2013) considers access to education a crucial policy measure to improve individual's well-being.

Nighat has also shared her grieving story that how she slipped on the road due to heavy rain. She got serious injury in her back. No employer except two were willing to help her treatment but her treatment requires huge amount of Rs.20, 000.

My poor husband was worried. As this help was insufficient. Poverty is a curse, which even makes your relatives run away.

Somehow, she has arranged the money by borrowing from a neighbor (man) on the promise of return within a year. After the provision of proper medical help, she recovered. She started work again. And within one year she returned the money, she recalled her bad experience by saying,

My heart sinks when I think of joblessness, may God bless health and my job. Life is suppressed from all sides.

Mixed responses emerged regarding disbursements of their income and personal savings. Sobia replied,

Living is hard these days, we have to work. I am living at my own, husband always wander around.

Naila also lamented about inflation and lack of savings:

This thought really crosses my mind, but it's difficult to meet the necessities.

I am doing job for my kids' betterment, it's difficult to live without money.

Khalida said. Apart from that, Women carry a co-operative and trusting relationship with their husbands. Most of the domestic servants in the sample are living as a nuclear family unit. Few were living with their in-laws during the initial years of marriage but then their in-laws have willingly separated them due to limited space. Sobia replied,

Living is hard these days, we have to work together to run the family.

They all complaint about inflation and their limited income. However, there are women whose husbands are not supporting them financially. Respondent Maqbool said

I am living at my own, husband always wanders around so it's hard to live, savings are out of question. It is so difficult to earn bread and butter. In this uncertainty, losing job haunts.

In the middle of financial vulnerability, the women whose husbands are not supporting them, all their earnings went for survival. Since women keep money, hence she is the sole decision maker of the family. In this way, they are able to fulfill most of the material needs of their family including themselves. However, some respondents have also given contradictory statements; Rasheeda shared an experience of fight as

Once I had a fight with my mother-in-law. My husband slapped me so hard that I got a cramp in my neck. After that I never dared to argue.

Whereas Nadia said,

Angaron ki qabberha, Koi aisa din nahin jab larai na hoti ho

Life is a grave of cinders (like hell). Not a day passes by that we don't fight.

Parveen is contented with her life and opines:

Although life was worth living when my husband was alive but in difficult times, even princesses also have to work hard. We think a lot but its God Almighty who knows everything. I do not care about (people) what do they think about our working status. If they think, bad about us (as they are working outside performing lower status job) then give us money so that we will stay at home.

However, some respondents have discussed that their low social economic status is the core reason of their position in the society. Earlier women were much valued in the society, irrelevant of their working status.

Society has changed a lot; woman is not much respected.

These comments illustrate anxiety among the domestic workers. To avoid frustration and anxiety, they have certain social arrangements which serve as power networks. There is existence of common sisterhood. To deal with stress and difficulty, they take help from their neighbors and co-workers who belong to the same class and serve as social capital. During stress, pain and frustration they work as a support group for each other. This interconnectedness helped them in fulfilling their household chores, shopping, childcare, medical help in case of emergency and fulfill the requirement of relatives in this unfamiliar world.

I share my problems with fellow workers, despite they help me financially or not, at least they help emotionally.

Most of them want to build their own houses to avoid the house-rent.

We have pooled our resources for house building who so ever need first we facilitate her.

With their limited income, they are unable to improve their living standard rather than the option or feeling to deserve respect within the family they have to face the double burden. When the domestic servants reach home from work, their own pending house-hold chores are waiting for them. Their young girls have to work harder as on weekend they have to do weekly washing as well as daily errands are also assigned to them like washing dishes or preparing family meal. The domestic servants, who have elder daughters, get a helping hand in outside work and escape from most of the housework. Sobia, who is an unmarried domestic servant, confessed,

I intentionally cook tasteless food to get rid from the responsibility.

There was another respondent Saima who is sixteen years old. She is supporting her family, comprised of five siblings. They all go to school, except her younger sister who is six months old. Her mother is also a domestic servant. Twice her employers accused Saima of theft. Even beaten by her uncle in the open street as he was working as a driver from where Saima has stolen jewelry. With this aberrant behavior, they show a conscious resistance (agency) towards imperialistic (Capitalist) class segregation by involving in burglary or deliberately making tasteless food.

Home is the paradise; there is no substitute of it

I want to stay at home and wait for my kids to spend time with them. If my husband had a job, I would have been grateful that I could be a homemaker

Shazia explained her predicament. On defining difference between work at her own place and as a domestic servant at others houses *Shazias* aid:

One does her work with her own will, and other's work by their directions. Moreover, we have to be on time for work but when it comes to our own household, we do it whenever we feel like doing else it stays the way it is. It is the prime responsibility of male to run the house and earn.

Discussion and Analysis

Shazia's comments are in contrast with the development policy experts who believe that public-private dichotomy (Walby, 1986) is the main reason for women's oppression and that by removing this binary, women will be liberated from alleged oppression of prevailing power structures like patriarchy. They are great proponents of gender equality which could be achieved through economic empowerment of women. This discourse is mobilised through neoliberalism. Kabeer (1999, p. 438) indicated women agency as "it refers people's capacity to define their own life-choices and to pursue their own goals, even in the face of opposition. It also has a negative connotation which is the capacity of an actor or category of actors to override the agency of others, for instance, through the use of violence, coercion and threat." So these are small proofs of showing their agency. Women experiences are shaped up through local and historical culture influenced by global forces (Ahmad, 2010). They feel more liberated while following the religious path. They have certain ideas about gender behavior and sexuality. Most of them describe patriarchy as a non-negotiable vow. To them, Patriarchal subjugation within the framework of household is better than societal subjugation. Along poverty and illiteracy, Patriarchal and religious aspects are coalescing with domestic servants' experiences. Escape in religion emerged as a plausible solution. As an act of reconciliation, they consciously appropriated religious sayings which befitted their personal needs. Religion became a site that clearly magnified contradictions and instability that were often characteristics of the daily experience of the women. They are using religion to gloss over certain economic and social realities, as they do not want to break the gender and social norms. With the help of this consciousness about their culture and class, they would be able to improve their life conditions as well as social status in the society. As it is reflected in the words of almost all the twenty domestic servants, an account from a respondent is as follows:

Equality is difficult, man is made superior; his earnings are more sacred. Women can compete in the race of money but not in place. In due course, only husband has the right to take the decision. I accept quietly whatever he decided.

They do not hesitate to quote religious sayings to substantiate their contention towards "convenience of subservience and subordination."⁴ In this way, some of them did not see any contradiction in between being religious and simultaneously indulging in behaviors that contradicts their beliefs (Abdullah, 2018). They are inadequate as an academic ideal but fulfill the social ideal. This flexibility was part of the whole assortment of contradictions and accommodations that portray their daily life situation. As Khader (2014) highlighted, Women often gain social and material benefits from complying with patriarchal norms, where social and material rewards for complying with patriarchal norms align, women also gain senses of coherence and self-esteem from internalizing them. In addition, women

⁴ A trope used by Ayesha Jalal but in a different context.

ultimately resort to the conventional strategies for their well-being. Adoption of these strategies to secure benefits could pronounce as wise act. So, keeping in mind the trope of economic empowerment for women well-being is just like ignoring their choices and treating them as children. People are best judges of themselves (Nussbaum, 2000). The gender equality movement which should work for their emancipation is entwined with neoliberalism which channeled feminism to fulfil its political objectives by inculcating market value. This movement denies the significance of 'socioeconomic' and 'cultural structures'. Neoliberal feminism which emerged in US and UK and is more concerned about 'empowerment' and 'choice' and least concerned about equality, rights and justice. Neoliberal feminism cyphers wage gap and sexual harassment as inequality. And encourage women to take responsibility of their own well-being and self-care ultimately dealing with only middle and higher classes of the society. This type of feminism is exclusionary and not mobilising the masses. Moreover, it links itself with neoliberal capitalism only encompassing white, privileged classes by endorsing neo conservative agenda(Catherine, 2018). "Neoliberalism has created a new political, economic, and cultural context through deregulation, privatization, securitization, and the dismantling of the welfare state." women (Nadasen, 2012).These changes have a contradictory impact on women. Advocates of neoliberalism endorses the idea of rational being making rational choices in the market driven economy which offers gender-blind economic structures. These policies may be helpful for the educated women by offering her further opportunities but may limit the choices presented to working class women. Therefore, it's their agency and a rational strategic choice to take the garb of religion to find their own power (solace) in it, to avoid the social marginality; they choose subordinate position in the house. The results reveal that due to their employment as domestic servants, they are able to fulfill the material necessities, but they will acknowledge the empowerment, and appreciate it more if it comes through their husbands. Due to long working hours and lesser remunerations, they are not happy about their working status and think that their delusional empowerment has left them empty-handed. As Shahid (2014) asserts, domestic servants who belong to informal sector, don't feel a sense of investment in their work and low socio-economic status makes them powerless even to negotiate and this is the reason they are not passionate about their work.

Domestic servants always relate their uplifting with their family's well-being. Their positive views and thoughts about the provision of basic amenities of life and right of education to their off springs irrespective of gender are very much visible. The major obstacle, which they face, as per their realisation is poverty which forced them to join public sphere. Somehow, they oppose the argument of Walby(1986) who blame public private dichotomy, the sole reason which strengthen the existing power structures. Contrary to this, domestic servants aspire to stay at home and take care of their children. In the presence of their empowerment, they remain empty-handed. Henceforth, in the absence of material resources, the idea of obedience sounds compelling. They internalize the dominant patriarchal norms in order to gain a better bargain of self-representation in the society. Another important finding regarding domestic servants is the successful enactment of association among their peer group (other domestic servants) which signaled the high altitude of maturity. Women do congregate with their social groups to feel a sense of selfhood which support them at the time of misery. So, their personification of obedience to the dominant structures is not their false consciousness but requirement of their cultural settings. It is their way of life and understanding of prevailing culture. Why we take it as traditional dependence and not as contemporary, liberatory debate? This embodiment of submission is a strategy to enhance well-being. Women subjectivities are historically and culturally heterogeneous. We should not undermine the degree to which such diversity of locale and socio-cultural settings construct the

preferred choices; neither we should try to magnify these differences. The study also reveals that each individual has her own subjective nature, and the phenomena cannot be generalized for all.

Conclusion

The present study reveals that most of the women surveyed are not getting empowered on the basis of their employment rather they feel oppressed due to spending long hours outside home. Apart from that they do not show any sense of improved self-worth and individual well-being. Despite this they cannot leave work in the face of helplessness, uncertainty and vulnerability. Their employment does not bring any respect or long lasting monetary benefits. The dominant liberal policy framework then as such fails to empower these women in any real sense.

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