

Psychological Empowerment: The Key to Mobilizing Rural Women as Agents of Poverty Eradication

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, governments across the world have increasingly recognized the importance of empowering women and have committed themselves to this end. Empowerment of women, especially rural women, has also been seen as a crucial means to eradicate poverty. However, the majority of women empowerment and poverty eradication programs are grounded solely on economic approaches and psychological perspectives remain largely ignored. This paper argues that economic empowerment of women is incomplete without their psychological empowerment. Mental well-being is an important precursor to economic well-being. Rural women face unique psychosocial stressors, including scarcity that predisposes them to mental illnesses. This is likely to hinder their productivity which, in turn, perpetuates poverty. In the absence of a strong psychological buffer, any attempt to empower women to address poverty is likely to be unsuccessful. There is a massive dearth of programs addressing mental health issues to ensure psychological empowerment. This paper offers certain psychosocial models and perspectives to women's empowerment and its role in alleviating poverty. It is imminent that these perspectives be used to guide poverty eradication programs along with the current economic approaches.

Keywords: Women's Empowerment, Psychological Empowerment, Poverty Eradication

Introduction

Traditionally, the designing and implementation of social policies has carried an inherent assumption of man being a rational agent. This rational model of man aims to stimulate behavioural change through punishing undesirable behaviour and incentivizing desirable behaviour patterns. However, this idealized notion of the "economic man" who acts with complete rationality, has

all the required knowledge needed for effective decision-making and seeks to maximize utility has been criticized by several behavioural economists. Amos Tversky's and Daniel Kahneman's pioneering work, for instance, has been dedicated to the analyses and understanding of human choices and decision-making processes. Psychological theories of human cognition view individuals as having limited information processing capacities. Poor people live in a constant condition of scarcity. Scarcity can be understood as a subjective appraisal that one's needs outweigh the resources available to cater to them. Because of the absence of any financial buffers, people living in poverty have greater considerations, such as opportunity costs and budget restrictions, to factor in while making decisions. These deliberations act as additional burdens and tax the limited cognitive resources that individuals possess. With their cognitive bandwidth expended on simple tasks, their ability to take "completely rational" decisions to ensure long-term gain is compromised. The cognitive overload thus induced makes poor people more prone to erroneous decision-making characterized by an increased reliance on heuristics or rules-of-thumb (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974; Kahneman, 2003). Heuristics provide mental short-cuts and quick ways of making choices thereby keeping the strain on cognitive capacity under check. However, heuristics are also likely to result in poor financial choices resulting from an almost-automatic decision-making process and the possible ignorance of any novel or critical information. Excessive reliance on heuristics is also likely to lead to decreased attention span, decreased self-control and increased present-centric behaviour (Thaler, 2015) - all of which are detrimental to rational and informed decision-making. For instance, the obvious choice to take a high-interest loan to pay an overdue bill is an apt example of

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how decisions influenced by scarcity are likely to facilitate scarcity itself resulting in a vicious trap.

The widely prevalent gender based biases and inequality place women in a particularly disadvantageous position. Their gamut of choices is restricted not only by the limiting effect of scarcity on their decision-making processes but also by gender. The central role that women play in poverty eradication has gained global recognition. However, if any efforts for mobilizing women, especially rural women, as agents of poverty eradication are to be successful, it is essential that they be well grounded on a psychological understanding of human behaviour in contrast to a purely economical approach.

Women, Power & Poverty

UNDP's Human Development Report (2015) observes that historically and globally men have greater access to power than women. Power, thus, is gendered. In effect, it implies that along with having greater access to the use of force and greater control over resource, men have fewer social obligations to uphold than women. Gender inequality is rampant in almost all arenas of life such as access to education, employment opportunities and availability of economic resources (UNDP, 2015). For instance, women constituted 66% of the world's illiterate adult population and only 20% of low-income countries had managed to achieve gender parity in primary education in 2011 (UNESCO, 2014). An increasing recognition of the prevalence of gender inequality worldwide has led nations across the globe to dedicate their efforts to working towards a gender-equal world through empowering women. As noted in UN Women (2016), various interventions are being developed and implemented across the world to strengthen the position of women in diverse walks of life such as education, health and employment.

Apart from lacking power, women living in poverty massively outnumber men. Out of the 1.3 billion people living in poverty across the world, 70% are women (UN Economic and Social Council, Commission on the Status of Women Report, 2012). Estimating purely by their numbers, if this vast majority of women can be mobilized as chief agents of poverty alleviation programs then, undoubtedly, poverty can be significantly reduced, if not entirely eliminated. Over the past few decades, governments

across the world have increasingly acknowledged the crucial role of women as tools of poverty eradication. In turn, they have made commitments, at both national and international levels, to empower women. This idea of linking women empowerment with poverty eradication has found expression at several platforms. Some of the landmark examples of this include the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979), Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies on the Advancement of Women (1985), Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action (1995) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) among others.

These declarations and follow-up mechanisms have undoubtedly been successful in increasing awareness about gender inequality and discrimination. However, they have not been enough to ensure that empowerment of women, as a tool of poverty eradication, becomes a developmental priority. They have also failed to channelize resources and programs of the governments to empower rural women as an effective and sustainable approach to eradicate poverty. Further, several reports on the situation of women indicate that rural women face increasing inequality. (UN Interagency, Gender Dimensions of Agricultural and Rural Employment: Differentiated Pathways out of Poverty, 2011; UN Women-In Focus Rural Women, 2011). These reports also call for policies and programs that enable rural women to drive economic growth and poverty reduction.

Despite the emphasis on policies centered around empowerment of women to alleviate poverty, the fundamental approaches that most nations and even UN agencies use in their efforts to eradicate poverty are inherently problematic. They focus primarily on economic indicators to the exclusion of psychological factors that are important in the empowerment of women. The contribution of psychological perspectives on empowerment as a key to poverty reduction has largely been ignored. Psychosocial empowerment and mental well-being is likely to enhance the potential of rural women and, in turn, the contribution that they can make to the eradication of poverty.

Mental Health and Poverty

A World Health Organization Report (2010) noted that "the international community is slowly coming to the realization that mental health is one of the most

neglected yet essential development issues in achieving the millennium development goals.” There is no dearth of literature that stresses on the intricate relationship that exists between poverty and mental health. Depression, for example, has been strongly associated with poverty (Simmons, Braun, Charnigo, Havens, & Wright, 2008). This problem is of a greater concern for rural women. Research indicates that rural women are likely to experience more stressors and are more prone to depression and psychological distress (Hays & Zouari, 1995). This condition is worsened by the fact that women living in rural areas have lesser access to psychological assistance and treatment than women in urban areas. Research provided by WHO (2010) indicates that mental disabilities are likely to diminish people’s ability to tap on to certain essentials such as basic income generating opportunities, health, education and social services. There appears to be a causal link between poor mental health and poverty. It would, however, be premature to believe that mental disability causes poverty. In fact, a bidirectional relationship exists between the two - poor mental health is both a cause and consequence of poverty.

The bi-directional causal link can be understood as functioning at multiple levels as depicted in Figure 1. A multitude of stressors including poverty, lack of access to educational facilities, poor civil amenities, few economic opportunities, violence, domestic abuse, rape, early marriage etc. interact with each other causing poor mental health and predisposing people to mental illnesses such as anxiety and depression. This, in turn, has a delirious effect on the ability to cope as well as the productivity of the person. Decreased productivity and clouded decision-making leads to poor economic choices resulting in the persistence of poverty. Hence, there is a self-perpetuating vicious cycle at work - poverty is a crucial stressor that results in poor mental health, which leads to decreased productivity and coping ability of the individual ensuring the persistence of poverty.

Important to note is that there are programs targeting the Stage 1 stressors - programs to ensure creation of job opportunities, training and skill building programs, education schemes, cleanliness drives, laws against domestic abuse etc. However, a lacuna exists when it comes to addressing Stage 2 i.e. programs targeted at ensuring freedom from mental disabilities and facilitating psychological wellbeing. There are only a handful of

policies in place to ensure mental health care facilities in rural areas (for example, The Mental Healthcare Act 2017). However, their provisions are far from adequate and they face severe delays in implementation. Even where mental health care centers have been established the infrastructure, facilities and quality of treatment that they provide is abysmal. According to the World Health Organization’s Mental Health Atlas (2011), there are as few as 0.004 mental hospitals available and only 1.469 beds available in these mental hospitals per lakh of population in India. Unless this need gap is addressed it is almost impossible to break the self-perpetuating cycle of poverty. Both governmental and non-governmental bodies should endeavor to provide quality mental healthcare facilities to psychologically empower individuals living in rural areas and specifically to empower rural women. A psychological approach to women empowerment is likely to aid in the development of effective intervention programs to eradicate poverty.

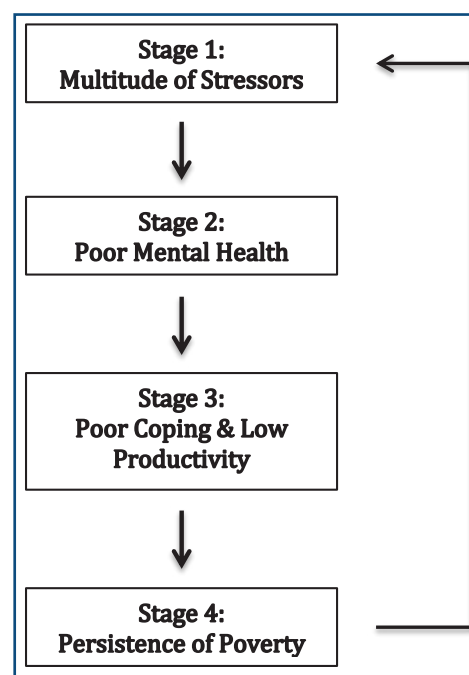


Fig. 1: Self-perpetuating Cycle of Poverty and Poor Mental Health with One Leading to Another

Psychological Empowerment & Poverty Eradication - Intervention Planning

In community psychology, empowerment is understood as “an intentional, ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection or

evaluation, caring and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of resources gain greater access to and control over these resources” (Zimmerman, 2010). The notion of empowerment can be seen as consisting of two different but overlapping components - the individualistic component and the collectivistic component. From an individual standpoint, the personal capacities of the person and their ability to make informed and independent choices are focused at (Kabeer, 1999). However, the individual does not function in isolation and is always influenced by and influences a larger whole i.e. his environment. Thus, the individual’s collective behaviour becomes important. Empowerment, then, constitutes congenial cultural beliefs and norms embedded in the social structure that facilitate collective growth and development (Kurtis, Adams, & Estrada-Villalta, 2016). According to WHO (2010), empowerment is both a multidimensional social process and a multidimensional social outcome that involves individuals and groups gaining control over events in their lives and improving their life circumstances.

From a psychological viewpoint, any effort to empower women should address issues at several levels. The intricately intertwined multiple layers that need to be addressed can be best understood by referring to the ecological systems framework given by Bronfenbrenner (1994). This theory is based on the assertion that an individual never functions in vacuum but is embedded in multiple layers of environmental systems. There is a complex reciprocal interaction between a person and these environmental systems that affects the person’s development and behaviour. The 5 layers of environmental systems as are follows:

- **Microsystem** - This refers to the immediate environment of an individual that directly impacts his behaviour. It includes the immediate family, school, friends, religious affiliation etc.
- **Mesosystem** - The elements in the microsystem do not exist independently but continue to interact with and affect each other. An individual’s behaviour is also affected by these interactions or connections. For example, interaction between parents and teachers affect a child’s behaviour. These interactions constitute the mesosystem.
- **Exosystem** - The environmental aspects of which the individual is not directly a part of but still affect the

individual indirectly constitute the exosystem. For example, a child might not have an active role in his parent’s workspace but the parent’s experiences at work continue to impact the child’s development as it has a profound effect on the parent-child relationship. Therefore, the parent’s workspace becomes a part of the child’s exosystem.

- **Macrosystem** - The macrosystem describes the culture in which the individual lives. Members belonging to a cultural group share a common identity, traditions and values. This cultural context, including poverty, class, caste, ethnicity, socioeconomic and political conditions, law and order, and gender-based norms, is a part of the macrosystem.
- **Chronosystem** - The chronosystem involves the patterns of significant environmental events and transitions that occur over a lifetime of an individual and have an impact on his behaviour. For example, the financial meltdown was a life-altering event for many.

Drawing from this multi-systemic view, real empowerment of women can occur only when it is adequately reflected in the elements of all the environmental systems that determine human behaviour and development. Huis, Hansen, Otten, and Lensink (2017), for instance, have proposed a Three-Dimensional Model of Women Empowerment which posits that the empowerment of women can take place at three distinct levels:

- The micro-level or personal dimension includes personal beliefs and actions on an individual. In terms of psychological indicators, personal empowerment of women would be manifested in their self-confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy, locus of control etc.
- The meso-level or relational dimension includes beliefs and actions in relation to others. Psychosocial indicators of relational empowerment include the bargaining power that women possess, the size of their social network, involvement in collective action, the absence of domestic violence, freedom of mobility, social capital etc.
- The macro-level or societal dimension includes larger societal outcomes. Gender disparity in human development, proportion of female microfinance borrowers, average loan balance for female

borrowers, representation of females in leadership of financial institutions, promotion and attrition in female staff etc. are among the reflectors of societal empowerment.

Psychosocial empowerment approaches to eradicate poverty among rural women are based on the fundamental reality that although literature deals with rural women as a homogenous group, they are actually varied and heterogeneous. They constitute a group with great diversity and individual differences. There is a wide range of communities, cultures, environmental conditions etc. that these women are a part of. Despite the overlap or similarity in the factors influencing them, they are quite distinguished - disability status, caste, prevalent gender norms, different geographical areas, social status of the group they belong to - all have a unique impact on their lives (Kardam, 1991). Most of our knowledge

about rural women comes from the study of specific selected groups of rural women. However, it will be inept to generalize this knowledge to women living in rural areas across the world without due consideration to the unique circumstances that they are embedded in (Krook & True, 2012). In light of these large spatial and temporal variations, research projects and intervention programs that focus on rural women have to be demographically and culturally relevant to the communities they serve in order for them to be effective (Hafner & Pollack, 2002; World Bank, 2001).

One such approach, focusing on psychosocial empowerment of women, within the context of their spatial and temporal circumstances, involves program development and implementation in 3 steps (Zimmerman, 2000) as depicted in Fig. 2.



Fig. 2: 3-Step Model of Psychological Empowerment of Rural Women (Zimmerman, 2000)

Step 1: First, a body of community change agents is required. This involves mobilizing individuals who would play an active role in various spheres, such as peer counselors or community leaders, to reduce the psychological distress experienced by women and to encourage their participation in economic and social activities. The end goal of the activities in this initial stage is to ensure that rural women gain a sense of self-determination and personal efficacy or competency.

Step 2: The second stage consists of bringing together rural women to build community networks among them. This is aimed at reducing their isolation and providing opportunities for them to expand their sense of belongingness. This networking is also likely to provide rural women with opportunities to share their skills and resources thus strengthening and advancing their skill base. It will also provide them with an alternate social support system to exchange perspectives and resolve their concerns. Social connectedness has been known to offer important cushioning against mental illness (Saeri, Cruwys, Barlow, Stronge, & Sibley, 2018; Lamblin,

Murawski, Wittle, & Fornito, 2017). Mental health concerns are, therefore, also addressed at this stage.

Step 3: The final step involves supporting the engagement of rural women in social and economic decision making at all levels. This is aimed at ensuring their ownership and representation in economic planning without which empowering interventions may end up being disempowering if rural women view them as being too externally controlled rather than coming from within (Hur, 2006). This will encourage them to take social action to build their communities.

In this context the concept of psychological distance also becomes important. The idea of psychological distance was prominently used in the Field Theory of Kurt Lewin (1951). This theory views an individual as part of a field or environment and analyses patterns of interaction between the two. Psychological distance can be understood as the cognitive separation, or the subjective appraisal of distance, between the self and other aspects in the self's environment such as people, organizations,

events, policies etc. Trope and Liberman (2003) discussed psychological distance as implying temporal distance in their Construal-Level Theory which assesses the relationship between psychological distance and mental representations in thinking. Later, they further developed their theory to add three other dimensions, namely, social distance, spatial distance and hypotheticality (Liberman, Trope, & Stephan, 2007). Fiedler (2007) further expanded the concept to include other forms of distances, namely, informational, experiential, affective and perspective distance. Although, predominantly used to understand consumer decision-making, these ideas also find immense utility in appreciating that building close linkages and integrating women closely with the process of empowerment is likely to enhance the effectiveness of women empowerment programs.

In a UN sponsored participatory impact assessment of South Asian Poverty Alleviation Programme in Andhra Pradesh, Murthy, Raju, and Kamath (2002) used “Chapatti-diagraming” to assess the self-help groups’ and village organizations’ perceptions of psychological distance of governmental and non-governmental institutions. “Chapatti-diagraming” is used to investigate how psychologically close or far people are from a particular institution or issue and how important it is to them. The results indicated that, barring a few, the psychological distance of most local organizations was high. While some local organizations like mandal samakhya, mothers groups, village education committees and village forest protection committees were seen as approachable and the self-help groups worked closely with them, the relationship with most other local organizations was distant. Psychological linkages with organizations providing basic services that were based in the village were stronger. Institutions run by officials based outside the villages, such as district administration, agriculture, animal husbandry and block development office, were seen as inapproachable and psychologically distant. This amply highlights the important role that psychological distance can play in determining the effectiveness of a program or intervention by an institution. Despite being physically located closely, very few local organizations were able to establish close linkages with the community while most others remained psychologically distant. Thus, by implication, organizations functioning outside the village can reduce the psychological distance by working

towards establishing close linkages with people thereby enhancing the effectiveness of their programs. Drawing from the 3-Step Model, mobilizing a body of community change agents, building community based networks and involving women in decision making at all levels is likely to bridge the psychological gap at multiple levels. It will reduce the spatial distance by engaging people physically, and the social distance by ensuring that people of diverse classes and status engage with one another and work together. The informational distance shall be eliminated by dissemination and exchange of information while the experiential and perspective distance shall be addressed by facilitating varied first hand experiences and sharing of worldviews.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Psychosocial approaches to women’s empowerment shift the focus away from generalized universal theories of human’s economic behaviour towards a more nuanced individualized understanding embedded in a person’s unique culture and environment. As noted by Nayak (2015), skill development alone cannot ensure employability of a person unless other competencies such as communication skills, interpersonal relations and positive attitude are ensured. The psychosocial approaches appreciate this. While empowering they aim to promote rural women’s human rights, recognize and capitalize on their strengths, identify their weaknesses and develop their skills to counter them, recognize need gaps and provides resource to address them. Most importantly, from a psychological perspective, they build upon the “psychological capital” of these women. These approaches recognize that the vitality and resilience of rural women are “protective factors” that should be nurtured as buffers (Smalley, 2010; Spreitzer, 2005). These buffers can serve as the basis for planning effective preventive and intervention programs to alleviate poverty.

In India, more than 60 percent of the workers in the agricultural sector are women (Selvakumar & Jegatheesan, 2017). Further, they constitute a significant part of the rural labour force. Several policies and programs exist to address various issues concerning the empowerment of rural women. However, most of them primarily have an economic focus. The importance of psychological empowerment in ensuring real empowerment of rural women has not yet been recognized. Keeping in mind

the crucial role that psychological empowerment plays in mobilizing women as agents of poverty eradication, it is imminent that psychological perspectives be used to guide poverty eradication programs along with the current economic approaches. Organizations and governments need to come together, both at the national and international levels, to ensure that women are psychologically empowered. It is only then that true empowerment of women can be achieved.

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