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Negotiating Empowerment: Pakistani Women Exercising Agency in Domestic and Public Spheres

By Laraib Qureshi¹ & Saadia Abid²

Abstract

This article explores women negotiating empowerment in domestic and public spheres as beneficiaries of a women's empowerment project. While these empowerment interventions are noteworthy, they are also misleading because they ignore the local expressions of agency, where women at home also exercise power and conscious decision-making in their own contexts, just as much as any other working women--which is equally significant when talking about empowerment. We argue that there are other expressions of empowerment that are neglected, trivialized, or unacknowledged by the mainstream discourse. In a similar context, we argue that local women, while understanding the NGO's definition of empowerment, not only have their own opinions on their 'docile' lives as wives, sisters and mothers in the domestic sphere but also take a course of action in public that can be interpreted as 'negotiating empowerment' in ways that lead to personal gain, thus exercising agency.

Keywords: Empowerment, Agency, Patriarchy, Conscious decision-making, Negotiation

Introduction

Within the development sector including NGOs, women's empowerment is being widely recognized as a 'bottom up' process to transform gender power relations through awareness and capacity building done by individuals or groups. The term empowerment has come to occupy a central position in most development programmes and especially in relation to women. The complexity of the term manifests itself in being used interchangeably with agency (freedom to choose), control (over decision making), access (to resources) and above all, having power. (Reeves & Baden, 2000)

The mainstream understanding of empowerment primarily shapes the objectives of the NGOs as they carry out development projects, attempting to make the beneficiaries aware of their rights, needs and most significantly, agency to act. These interventions encourage women to venture into the public sphere, be vocal about their demands and learn income generating skills and thus be a part of decision-making processes. In short, be empowered and exercise agency. This is cemented in the notion that women who have the confidence to venture into the public sphere as 'working women' can be seen as empowered because their work is recognized on monetary terms alongside men. In most of the cases the organisations believe it to be the authentic course of action, and this is not contested in this article.

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It is, however, recognized that empowerment itself is a contested term, and it is inappropriate to determine people's experience of empowerment for them. The best way to approach it is with the voices and opinions of people who then decide what empowerment means to them and who are assessed through their lived experiences. (Jupp & Ali, 2010)

This article establishes empowerment as multi-faceted having varied expressions. It explores ways in which women, who are active beneficiaries of a women's empowerment project, negotiate within their domestic space and public sphere. We see them as exercising agency and their negotiations as expressions of empowerment, albeit in forms different from the mainstream understanding of empowerment. Notwithstanding, the value of afore-mentioned interventions and increasing acceptance of women in public spheres, we argue that it is also misleading as it ignores the local expressions of agency, where stay-at-home women exercise power and conscious decision making in their own context, just as much as 'working women' do in theirs. We contend that there are other equally important expressions of empowerment that are neglected or trivialised, or simply not acknowledged by the mainstream discourse.

It is an attempt to look beyond the defining characteristics of a Non-Western society like Pakistan, where women's submissiveness and lack of power is understood as an underlying, albeit unfortunate, aspect of a patriarchal society. Deniz Kandiyoti, on women's strategies and coping mechanisms in patriarchal systems, coined the term 'patriarchal bargain' where women strategize to maximise security and obtain a semblance of power in the face of oppression. These strategies within a set of concrete constraints become the blueprint that determines their level of subjectivity and resistance (Kandiyoti, 1988). In a similar context, we argue that local women, while understanding NGOs' definition of empowerment, not only have their own opinions on their 'docile'³ lives as wives, sisters and mothers in the domestic sphere but also takes a course of action in public space that can be interpreted as 'negotiating empowerment' in ways that lead to personal gain. And in doing so, exercise agency: an unforeseen, but a crucial interpretation of the word.

Power and Agency

Being the core concept of empowerment, power holds weightage in the definitions of empowerment in present literature. Also, power relations are a major component of the circumstances surrounding empowerment. The word power comes from the latin word *potere* which means 'to be able'. But this definition simplifies the complexity and significance of the concept because it has the potential to reshape and create the social order as well as the individuals in it (Siddiqui, 2005).

As a post-structuralist, Michel Foucault played a vital role in the re-definition of power. In his model of power, he saw power not as a possession, rather as an entity that is circulated and exercised. He also termed resistance as inevitable when it comes to exercise of power. (Foucault, 1980) This is significant in looking at power as a core concept of women's empowerment because their day-to-day struggles are evidence of this resistance to power relations.

Power was then seen as not only over another but the idea of having it and using it for positivity was introduced. In this regard, the notion that there are many different forms of power, and its ability to take them has been stated explicitly by (Rowlands, 1997, p. 13; Williams et al, 1994):

³ The objectives of NGOs aiming to achieve empowerment are shaped by the notion that women in Pakistan are not aware of their agency, especially home makers who are not employed outside of home. Thus, implying that they are docile and need to be made aware of their rights through an intervention.

Power over: Involving domination or subordination and generally a controlling power (zero sum) and in a gender analysis, dominantly used by men over other men and men over women. In this case, empowerment of women would imply less power for men.

Power to: Generative or productive power, creating possibilities that may include the ability to solve problems and have decision making authority therefore can be perceived as creative and enabling. This may include the achievable boundaries of a person.

Power with: Gives the perception of a group solving problems together, this is exercised commonly with others and gives rise to collective empowerment to achieve collective goals, so it is referred to as collective action.

Power from within: Individual's mental and spiritual strength is the focus, with self-awareness and self-confidence leading to change and acceptance of others as equals.

While talking about empowerment and power, Rai (2007) stated that empowerment has such different meanings and consequences because of the fluidity of the word power. It serves as an action verb, is transformational, signifies gaining control, showcases struggles for inclusion and is thought of as manipulating the agendas and thought processes of others.

Women's empowerment denotes empowering women but the complexity of the concept of power itself infuses into the complexity of defining empowerment. The terms included in defining it overlap with each other like choice, control, power, agency, process etc. When talking about agency, Saba Mahmood defined it as the ability to realize one's own interests under the weight of customs, traditions and other collective or individual obstacles. (Mahmood S. , 2001) According to her, the terms used by individuals to organize and understand their lives are not a testament to their ignorance of the universally shared assumptions and their place in it. It is reflective of their perception of reality, experiences and knowledge. Simply put, they are able to understand and articulate, within their own context.

The focus on women's agency, when it first emerged, led to new debates regarding gender in Non-Western societies, extending beyond the characteristic submission and patriarchy prevailing in them. Saba Mahmood, in her ethnographic account of an urban women's mosque movement in Cairo, Egypt, encouraged discourse which understood agency not merely as a synonym for resisting domination but as space for action created and enabled by relations of subordination. (Mahmood S., 2001) She thereby showcased women as active agents who live lives far richer and more complex than otherwise perceived, exercising agency in their own right.

Women's Agency in South Asian Contexts

Studies on women's agency within the South Asian context are always discussed against the introductory backdrop of family values, Islamic teachings, cultural conditioning and restricted socialization, shaping the life of a woman. Modesty, morality and conformity in the name of upholding family's honor as well as socio-cultural practices – forced or early marriages, honor killings, dowry killings etc. - act as barriers and threats to a woman's strive for autonomy. Then there are the hindrances due to lack of education, mobility and access to economic opportunities among many others leaving them structurally disadvantaged.⁴

Abrar-ul-Haq, Jali, & Islam (2016) did a study on empowering rural women from Southern Punjab with a focus on association between education and empowerment. Their study explores determinants of women's empowerment including their employment, engagement in economic activity, household status and educational level. The regression analysis showed education (5%

⁴ Khan & Awan (2011), Bibi (2012), Siddiqui (2005) etc.

increase), working status (5%), household size (5%) and health condition (10%) as contributing to women's empowerment in Pakistan. They recommended that women should be encouraged to make their own decisions and be provided equal opportunities for education. (Haq et al., 2016) Using pre-decided determinants for empowerment, this empirical study established empowerment as a measure of woman's well-being.

Mason & Smith's (2003) cross national study on the social context of women's empowerment's analyzed measures of married women's empowerment in the domestic sphere in 56 communities of 5 countries: Pakistan, India, Malaysia, Thailand and Philippines. Economic decision-making power, family size decision making power, mobility and husband's control via intimidation were measured via scale points rather than proxies. The authors concluded that social context has an influence over the power relations in the household, all aspects of women's empowerment are connected and interrelated to each other and proxy measures (like those used extensively) are problematic in indexing empowerment.

Deniz Kandiyoti's, analysis of patriarchal systems in Asian context is of particular significance here. It provides a lens that helps better analyze empowerment vis-à-vis the social context. The term 'patriarchal bargain', coined by Kandiyoti, refers to the strategies women adopt within patriarchal structure to gain autonomy and exercise agency. It entails the extent of their subjectivity and renegotiation of the relations between genders, showcased through control and authority yielded by women, older in age and senior in position (Kandiyoti, 1988) The internalization of patriarchy by women allows for accepted subordination to men, as it is offset by the power and maximization of security through manipulation of the male affections and upon producing a male heir, economic shelter.

There is an abundance of literature available on empowerment and agency of women in South Asia, especially Pakistan, including reports by the development sector and NGOs. The same factors used in a majority of these studies, like education, , mobility, income generating work, decision-making power - to name a few – have been used by the development sector time and again, in interventions aimed to provide agency to women at home. Malik (2018), however, questions the neglect of women's labour rights in discussions concerning women, empowerment and development. The need to understand empowerment not from statistically analyzed indicators but from the perspectives of women themselves, is the gap this study is attempting to fill. Women accommodate and adapt within the options available/provided to them. Akin to 'patriarchal bargain', we suggest 'negotiating empowerment' as a term that elucidates strategies used by women to negotiate conformity with agency.

Background and Locale

This research was conducted in Dhoke Khabba in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, where the local women have been beneficiaries of a women's empowerment project–Aawaz⁵ –being carried out by two NGOs respectively: Aurat Foundation and at grass roots level and its sister organization - Ahsas Welfare Foundation.

⁵ 'Aawaz' was a voice and accountability programme in its later phase aiming to promote active citizenship by strengthening women's voices through dialogue and engagement. It was programmed to support an empowered, mobilized and participatory minded citizenry, creating critical voice channels in the form of an active civil society with the focus on women and their voices.

Organizational Settings

Dhoke Khabba is situated in Rawalpindi city, so its topography is that of a small town rather than a traditional village. A densely populated area, Dhoke Khabba, provides housing mainly to lower socio-economic households. For this reason, there is abundance of privately owned organizations and NGOs in the area working for welfare and the residents are aware and accustomed to the services being provided. For the project concerning our study, the services include but are not limited to awareness raising initiatives; providing platforms for trainings and participatory meetings; provision of legal and technical assistance for conflict resolution; mobilization camps and campaigns; and study circles to discuss pertinent issues and their timely resolution. A common cross cutting theme in project programming is (a) the premise that there is a lack of women's public participation, (b) the aim to remedy this through awareness, mobilization, capacity building and training, (c) and providing them with platforms to raise their voices.

People who work for the two NGOs carrying out this project have different socio-economic backgrounds. Aurat Foundation (AF) employed educated individuals belonging to upper and middle socio-economic classes, understood as the 'upper level' of the project or the management team. This is the level where the project is initiated: objectives created, and implementation structured in accordance to the donor agency requirements. Ahsas Welfare Foundation (AWF) is the organization at the 'lower or grass roots level' within the locale, assisting the operationalization of the project. Employees are less educated, belonging to lower socio-economic class and living among the beneficiaries of the project. The data was collected both in *Aawaz Agahi*⁶ Centres (AAC) which were resource centres to disseminate awareness and conduct relevant meetings with the beneficiaries, as well as the homes of women. This centre was located in the offices of AWF and thereby, AWF representatives were not only key informants and resource persons, but also acted as mediators between the AF management team and the local women by assisting in the trainings and carrying out the study circles in the locale, implemented as per the objectives, manuals and instructions from the upper level. In addition, while AF employees consist of men and women alike, the corresponding managerial team for *Aawaz* consisted of women. AWF also employed men and women but the team members who were a part of this project had women in the majority, since participants were more comfortable in their presence. Hence, the composition of people who work for the NGOs regarding this project comprises two groups; educated women at the upper level and the indigenous, local women at the lower level, both of whom were well associated with Pakistani cultural norms.

Socio-economic Settings

The people living in Dhoke Khabba are of lower-middle and lower-class status. The area is densely populated, and poverty is rampant. Major occupations for men in the locale include local shop ownership in the market, rickshaw and taxi drivers, handyman, laborers, working in cement industries or tailors. There is a primary school for children in the area, but the secondary school and other colleges are located outside the research locale. Men and women alike have either passed matric or studied till secondary. However, many of the women in the area are illiterate or have only studied till 5th grade and married off after a few years. Therefore, the general perception towards girls' education is that it is not a necessity due to a preference for early marriages. The residents follow the traditional norms of a patriarchal society, with extended families living in compact structures, where the traditional gender norms of masculinity and femininity are natural

⁶ Roughly translates into awareness and information

courses of action, not to be contested. Men are the primary breadwinners while women are housewives (homemakers); their responsibilities confined to the domestic sphere, where the last word and decision-making power belongs to the males. Traditionally accepted notion of masculinity and femininity further contributes to lesser interest in girls' education.

Methodology

Qualitative research methods were used, as they help tap into people's lived experiences and their interpretations of their experiences. They also greatly helped understand our interlocutor's perspective in depth. Building on the social construction of reality; we were aware that the participants would interpret their own experiences differently. An inductive approach is applied—letting the data speak and not going into the field with a preconceived idea of what the researcher will find. (Vanderstoep & Johnston, 2009) This also allowed for the goal of 'getting inside the head of' the individual in order to see the world as the individual perceives it. It is also known as the emic perspective, which attempts to capture participants' indigenous meanings of real-world events, representing the internal language of the culture. (Olive, 2014).

Demographic Profile of Respondents

The following table shows the demographic profile of respondents interviewed for the purpose of the research:

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Characteristics			Frequency	Percentage
Ages				
Between	15-30	years	14	28%
Between	31-45	years	18	36%
Between	46-60	years	10	20%
Above 60 years			8	16%
Educational Level				
Illiterate			18	36%
Below	Secondary		8	16%
Matric			15	30%
F.Sc/F.A			5	10%
Masters			4	8%
Marital Status				
Married			38	76%
Widowed			4	8%
Divorced			1	2%
Single			7	14%
Religion				
Islam			47	94%
Christianity			3	6%

(Source: Fieldwork)

Research Techniques

Keeping the qualitative nature of the study in mind, the techniques we used in the study include rapport building, participant observation, key informant interviews, in-depth and unstructured interviews, focus group discussions and informal discussions. The collection of data using these techniques was aided by field notes.

Data Analysis

Thematic data analysis was carried out in order to identify, analyze and interpret common themes emerging from the qualitative data acquired. The responses were recorded using a field diary, and a recorder where required and permitted. Potential analytic categories emerged during the coding process, with the help of shorthand labels. This was followed by highlighting the phrases and sentences that matched these codes, thereafter, used as verbatims to support the analysis of the findings in the present work.

Sampling

A sample of 50 women were interviewed for the purpose of the research where in-depth interviews were conducted with 14 women. The rest were either conversationally interviewed during the field research or were part of the Focus Group Discussions (FDGs) and informal group discussions. Purposive and convenience sampling was utilized, and sample size was kept large enough to incorporate a variety of perceptions. Data collection was discontinued upon saturation. All interviews were conducted in Urdu/Punjabi and with informed consent. Aliases have been used to ensure confidentiality.

Findings and Discussion

In this article we explore how women negotiate empowerment first, in the domestic sphere, which also helps us arrive at an understanding of empowerment as conceptualized and achieved by our interlocutors. We then discuss women's negotiation of empowerment in the public sphere, primarily as observed in their interactions with the development organization carrying out the project on women's empowerment. We will quote specific instances to substantiate our identification of power negotiations between the local women and ones leading the project.

Negotiation in the Domestic Sphere

For the purpose of analysis, quotes from interviews with the target population of the project i.e., women residing in Dhoke Khabba have been selected, where in their attempts to explain what empowerment means, they shared their own understanding of it from experience and personal beliefs.

As Housewives

Some of these opinions were driven from the perception that empowerment of a woman is not space bound. It need not occur outside her home, some even defined it in terms of a woman's responsibilities as a housewife. Razia, a married 35-years-old housewife:

“When a woman has all the responsibility of the house, they must carry it through. If she leaves it half done, then her husband would remind her of her responsibility. When women fulfill their responsibilities appropriately, they do have a say.”

Another woman also gave her opinion in a similar context:

“I think a woman is born empowered and as she grows up, it depends on her to retain that power. If a woman is *gharelu* (home maker) and a good woman whom no one complains about, she is empowered. *Ghar acha basana is ba ikhtiar hona* (making a good home is empowerment) If a woman is not a good housewife, then nobody else will be good to her and she will face problems in her life. An empowered woman would follow the teachings of Islam.” (Maham, 45, Islamic teacher)

Therefore, for these women, empowerment of a woman is in her own hands, is achieved and retained by fulfilling all her responsibilities as a housewife. Power, then, lies in the potential to do her tasks at home to the best of her abilities because it gives her the added advantage of being heard and respected in the domestic sphere. Even though being ‘the best homemaker’ does little to alter the structurally unfavourable terms of the overall patriarchal script, women become experts in maximizing their own life chances. (Kandiyoti, 1988) Maximization of life chances here not only refer to longevity, but rather, they become experts in resisting the dominant male order by subverting the meanings of their gendered roles and redeploying them in a manner that gives them a sense of power. Being ‘born empowered’ and keeping that power by conforming to the societal norms to the best of her ability, is a testament to the fact that these women do not consider themselves to be powerless; they simply strategize within a set of constraints, thus enabling themselves to exercise agency in the domestic sphere. In short, conformity is negotiated with agency and empowerment.

Women's Seniority

Pakistani society being highly patriarchal also gives rise to and is attributed by the age-old traditions of a subservient and subordinate role of women. (Chaudhry et al., 2012) In addition to seeing power as vested in role fulfillment of a good housewife, some women view problem-solving and decision-making within the domestic sphere without involvement of husband as empowerment. Here, the possibility of empowerment revolves around the cyclical nature of women's power in the household and authority of senior women. A mother and housewife remarked:

“Yes, it is possible as I solve all my (referring to issues concerning domestic space) problems on my own. My husband leaves early at 7 in the morning and sometimes returns after midnight. I keep him informed about domestic matters, as trivial as breaking of a glass at home to issues of more serious concerns, like, motor malfunctioning. I have the *ikhtiar* (power) to take decisions on such matters, but I tell him about them.”

Another respondent opined similarly,

“Yes, they (women) are empowered. They can take decisions on their own, like my mother, who does not allow me to go outside the house. She has all the authority until my father comes home.” (Rubina, student)

Control and authority by a senior woman in a patriarchal household (after the male head of household) is part of the ‘patriarchal bargain’ where women maximize their own security with strategies aimed to downplay the power of younger women in the household, like a daughter-in-law. (Kandiyoti, 1988) This was apparent by the following experience and resulting opinions:

During a focus group discussion, a group of women came to a mutual agreement that cultural restrictions imposed on women’s work in public sphere and mobility are unfair. When inquired about who restricts, first they declared it is the ‘*muashra* i.e. society’ and then added family to it. Within family, they mentioned, mother and sister in-laws as supporting men in the family to impose restrictions. By the end of the discussion, and in response to Qureshi’s constant inquiry on domestic issues and empowerment, one of the women remarked humourously: “*lagta hai aap ghar mein larayan karwaengi*” meaning “seems you will cause friction in families” upon which, everyone laughed. Yasmeen, a grandmother with two sons and a grandson, added:

“Women are supposed to compromise with their husband, but they don’t. This new generation wants to be in control. A woman’s second name is *samjhota* (compromise.) Whenever there is a fight, the woman is supposed to compromise. I tell my daughter-in-law that you need to think about your child when stirring up trouble.”

The women’s words paint a picture that Kandiyoti has already explained in much detail: classic patriarchy gives power to senior women over young brides who are new to the household. Her deprivation and hardship will be rewarded as with age and time, as she takes the place of seniority as a mother-in-law to her own subservient daughter-in-law. The adoption of strategies to harness the love and affection of their sons and husband also include teaching the young women ‘compromise’ in the face of hardship i.e., oppression. Her time will come, but not until the current reign of older woman is over, albeit reinforcing the continuing dependence on men. This classic example of patriarchal bargain showcases a perspective that would go unnoticed, if a woman’s ability to negotiate power in the domestic sphere is not taken into consideration.

If, and only if, one shifts their perspective to women in the domestic sphere as wielding power as well, exercising their agency whilst being a picture of domesticity and conformity to gendered roles marked as oppressive, we see that these women do negotiate empowerment on their own terms and given their context. The context may be favorable and of their choice, but this is not the focus of the article. Instead, it explores negotiations within a given context.

Viewed in this way, what may seem like passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may very well be a form of agency – one that needs to be understood in the context of the conditions of its enactment. (Mahmood S., 2001) Instead of decontextualizing agency, the women’s understanding, and exercise of empowerment needs to be explained within their own context.

Veiling

Mahmood, on cultivating shyness as an exercise of agency, explained how veiling or conducting oneself modestly is the means of both being and becoming a certain kind of person. (Mahmood S., 2001) When taken in the context of empowerment, to veil⁷ is a conscious decision

⁷ Within Pakistani context, purdah or veil, is conceptualized variedly. Similarly, the expressions and practice entails multiplicity and heterogeneity. For more on veiling in Pakistan refer to (Abid, 2015) (Malik, Zafar, & Abid, 2021)

that a woman makes, in order to be the best versions⁸ of themselves and for them, this version is empowered. Many women, thus, define empowerment within the parameters set by religion. Tahira, a married 30-years-old housewife:

“An empowered woman has freedom but must observe *parda* (veil) when she goes out of the house because that would show she is a good, honorable woman.”

“A woman’s honor is in *parda* (cover). If she goes outside, she should cover herself fully and when searching for a job, should apply for a respectable job⁹ like teaching or being a nurse.” (Nusrat, housewife)

Nazreen, a 50-years-old widow and seamstress, stated:

“Mere khayal se ba ikhtiyari Islam ki hudood mein reh k awaaz uthana hai...aurat hudood k dairay mein reh ker ba ikhtiar ho sakti hai but hudood k dairay se bahar na niklay. Matlab sunnat pe amal karay. Bahar nikaltay waqt sar dhanp k niklay aur mardon k sath bethne se parhaiz karay. Hamara mulk he Islam k naam pe bana tha”

“Empowerment is to raise voices within the limits of Islam. A woman staying in her limits can still be empowered. She should never breach the boundaries. Meaning whilst following the teachings of the Holy Prophet. Like covering her head when she goes out and avoiding interaction with the males.”

The requirement for women to cover themselves in the public is often understood as an imposition of religious values barring women’s agency and freedom. However, Mehmood argues that the practice of modesty and veiling (in Muslim women in Egypt) as a symbolic practice is not only regulation of women’s body by male religious authority, but a concept utilized in shaping the disciplined self. (Mahmood S., 2001) Similarly, we found veiling as an architecture of self, molded and sustained by the women, as a chosen way of life. They feel very deeply about it, so much so, that their perception of empowerment is also shaped by their desire to live the life of a ‘good, honorable’ and thus disciplined woman.

The meaning of a symbol is determined by the practical context, articulating different aspects of power and discipline. West tends to associate veiling with extreme oppression of gender,

(Jamal, 2013). It is pertinent to note here that veil and veiling has remained a topic of interest and enquiry within feminist studies. A plethora of literature exists delineating on the multiple interpretations and multifaceted nature of veil across the Muslim world (Abu-Lughod, 1998) (El Guindi F., 1999) (Nesiah, 2003) (Grace, 2003) (Julie, 2009) as well as non-Muslim space (Böck, 2012) (Crosby, 2014) (Piatti-Crocker & Tasch, 2015)

⁸ A version that is considerably influenced by socio-cultural traditions, norms and values.

⁹ This indicates gendering of professions. Generally, it is preferred that women stay at home and take care of the domestic space. However, if a woman is to work there exists a well-defined understanding of male oriented and women-oriented professions. This is set on the traditionally set parameters of masculinity and femininity. This specific quote also indicates class-based professional preference. While for urban middle and upper socio-economic class doctor is a respectable profession, for the women in the area nursing is, as the former requires finances often beyond affordability.

seeing the veil as a symbol (and tool) of this inequality. However, a majority of Muslim women don't only voluntarily participate in veiling but in their defense, view it as a mark of agency, cultural membership and even resistance (Abid, 2015) (El Guindi F., 1999) (Mahmood S., 2005) It is even a tangible marker of independence. (Hirschmann, 1998) Hirschman points to the inadequacy of applying the Western idea of liberalism to Eastern veiling. Our point of concern is that the Western view of veil is taken as a precedent in highlighting hindrances to women's mobility (in public) in the discourse of empowerment present in Pakistan, abundantly followed by the social sector. Then, veiling is viewed as an anchor that drags the Muslim women back to the domestic sphere, not allowing them to be empowered in the public sphere.

Rather than ignoring such factors enabling agency, we argue that they need to be seen as an element of personal agency, where conforming to religious norms is also an exercise of power, in that, it is a transition from 'power over' to 'power to'. As deduced from the conversations with our interlocutors, a productive power and decision-making authority that necessitates veiling as a source of comfort, modesty and respect, is otherwise not obtained.

Already Empowered

Some women went as far as to confidently state that yes, indeed, they were empowered within their homes, were content, and did not need anything more than that. Two of the women (housewives) who were conversationally interviewed together, shared:

“We can do whatever we want to at home. Our husbands put their earnings in our hands and then we can spend it whatever way we want, even for grocery shopping. They even say that you can cook whatever you want. If you talk about empowerment, then we are empowered at home. Our husbands are at work all day, but we do take permission from them at certain times. We do not need more than that.”

“If I am getting everything at home, whatever I say, my husband brings for me, then why would I need to be empowered?” (Rukhshanda, housewife)

Content with their lives, the women found an 'empowerment' concept applied by the project i.e., mobilized and participatory minded women, willing to raise their voice about their rights, foreign. It may be important but is not considered as related to them because their needs are being fulfilled by men and they are content with their household responsibilities and current lives. In developing countries, the culture of female modesty, deference, obedience and self-sacrifice have defined women's lives for centuries and shouldn't be assumed to be incapable of constructing good and flourishing lives for the women. (Nussbaum, 2000 as cited by Mosedale, 2005) In this instance, a feminist analysis may argue that these women are disciplined to desire and choose the very things that they are limited to. However, for us to make a judgment about this lifestyle one considers oppressive, it is important to consider the context in which it is embedded and understand the significance of this subordination to the women who comply with it.

Here, we must pay attention to the fact that these women actively work on themselves to become the willing subjects of a discourse. Their decision to be content with what they have and articulating it within the parameters of empowerment cannot be simply interpreted as an unaware, uneducated decision. Their conversations reveal a reflective engagement with their reality and experience as well as a conscious decision making. For them, this *is* freedom, this *is* having power, this *is* their accepted reality. Agency, as practiced here, is the capacity to realize one's own interests

and ensure protection in exchange for submissiveness and propriety, which for them is most essential for a woman in this society.

So, whether it's as housewives, women's seniority, veiling or being content with their current living situation, in the domestic sphere women negotiate empowerment in ways that mainstream view of empowerment may neglect or trivialize or refuse because of pre-conceived notions about subjectivity and agency. Contrary to this belief, we propose that women in the domestic sphere are active agents, and agency is a capacity for action that can be pursued even in circumstances of subordination and conformity. In their attempt to be docile, they 'bargain with patriarchy' and 'negotiate empowerment' on their own terms. Here we would like to clarify that we, by no means are making a case for patriarchy and submission of women; we rather argue that within patriarchal structure, women do exercise some form of agency through negotiations and that neither these negotiations nor the alternate forms of agency and empowerment should be ignored. We further argue that to perceive these women as passive subjects waiting to be trained to become active agents is an erroneous assumption to begin with.

Negotiation in the Public Sphere

This section delineates the instances where the women negotiated empowerment in the public sphere, primarily, while interacting with the NGO as project beneficiaries. It discusses their alternative pathways to achieve their desired objectives, using the project platform as a steppingstone to do so.

It is important to note that the resource center being the nexus of the interaction between the project team and the local women, was also the place where the monthly meetings and awareness raising sessions took place. Here, rapport was built with the women from Dhoke Khabba who beneficiaries of the project were, followed by visits to their houses in the village itself.

Let us first explain the need and significance of monetary assistance provided by the NGO for the local women. Monetary assistance significantly motivated them to reassess and handle their interaction on the Aawaz platform for their benefit. Following are a few quotes illustrating the value of money:

"Paisa nai hai kuch bhi nai hai. Mujhe apna ghar pakka karna hai, bachon ki fees deni hai aur mere kam se bhi kharcha pura nai hota" meaning "If you don't have money, you have nothing. I want to get my house cemented, pay children's fees and the expenses aren't covered even from my work."
(Faseeha, housemaid)

"Jiske ghar paisa hota hai uske bewaqoof log bhi sianay hotay hai. Hamen kon suntan hai, ham tou ghareeb hain" meaning "money makes even a stupid wise. Who will listen to us? We are poor." (Azra, housewife)

"Bas meri jaib garam rahay tou wo khush rehte hain mujh se" (As long as my I have money, he (referring to her husband) stays happy with me)"
(Salma, housewife with stay-at-home husband)

Women living in Dhoke Khabba perceive money to be an essential need as well as a source of power in that they need it to fulfill their daily expenses, ensure good relations with the husband

and a respectable position in society. Such is the significance, that it motivated the women into 'negotiating' with the NGO in a power struggle and succeeded to get their way.

Rent: A Demanded Reciprocity

Among the women issues documented in a register at *Agahi* (resource) center, 'rent' came up as an unusual problem. Local women came to the center to inquire about it frequently. Upon asking the resource person (in-charge) explained:

"After the first few meetings, the women say that they are benefiting us, now we should do something for them in return. They say we don't need awareness; we are more aware than you. Our meetings sometimes fail because the volunteers refuse to come because they are not getting anything (financial)."

This was the main reasoning provided by the local women (and beneficiaries) for their demands of provision of rent for their participation. Upon further investigation, it was discovered that this money was factored in the project planning under the overhead costs of the project like travel allowance (for women who live far away) and refreshment provided in meetings. The local women, however, began perceiving it as 'rent' for their participation and saw it as their right in exchange for their time and participation. The significance of this rent for the local women is obvious from the following responses:

"The last time, we all waited for hours but not given what we were due. We can't come for just some refreshments. We should be given more respect this time."

"If I just go to meetings, then where will I eat from? If they (NGO) have the money, then they should also help financially, only this would motivate us to take more steps. Even if it's a few, only a woman who stands on her feet can speak on equal terms. (Farzana bibi, housemaid)

"Meetings are good, but the money is better. I use it to pay the school fees of my children, their (NGO's) money will be well used." (Razia, housewife)

The conscious negotiation and exchange of time for money reveals the awareness of local women of the value of their attendance and participation in empowerment awareness sessions organised by the NGO. They are also aware that their presence is of such worth that the NGO is ready to spend money on, even if it is not in line with the project objectives. This 'rent' underwent a transition from simply a 'demand' to a 'right' on the pretext that NGOs have money and are obligated to provide financial help in addition to the meetings. Interesting to note is the construction of argument in terms like the project objectives, rent would help women 'stand on their feet', 'raise their voice'.

This bargaining and resulting monetary transactions between unrelated persons in the public sphere bring to front the stark contrast between empowerment negotiations within domestic sphere versus negotiations in public space. Women as 'giver' of her time and attention at home and in public differs significantly. While at home the act of giving to their family grows out of

goodness of heart and love, in their roles as wives, mothers and daughters, a sense of generalized reciprocity prevails. In public, there is a strong sense of balanced reciprocity because they are providing something, and they require (financial) compensation in return. This was pointed out because their awareness of their importance as individuals is note-worthy, as a person who can stand up for herself and her family and make decisions that benefit both. They would not give their time for free.

Rent's literal dictionary meaning is a payment made for the use of a property, equipment or service. For the women to call it rent implied that their services had been utilized by the organization for their own purposes and the money was a payment made in return. Therefore, it can be extrapolated that it is the women's awareness that led to their demand for rent. They knew their time is literally precious, taken out of busy schedules, and this made it their right to be availed. Rowlands (1997) stated when questioning empowerment: it takes at least a minimum sense of self-worth and self-confidence for someone to state that their time and effort is worth payment – conditioning their involvement.

As a result, the activities conducted were seen as women doing a favor to the NGO rather than vice versa, where the women's main motivation for participation was the rent. They perceived the money to be the cost of the time they provided to the organization in lieu of their participation. According to an active participant in the meetings:

“Why did they call us if they weren't going to give us rent? I left my stitching to go there, why would I go there then if I could have earned 350 Rupees here at home? I earn for survival, that's the truth. Why did I waste my time there yesterday then? My children are studying, I have to pay their fees, buy the food for the house etc. Everyone is leaving their work and household duties behind to come to the meetings and when they don't get anything in return, it's a waste of their time.’

Her attendance and active participation in the discussions of the meeting was subject to the rent. As a woman, she had everyday expenses that she needed the money for and upon not receiving what she supposed was due, she went as far as to declare the meeting a waste of time. Some circumstances in an accepted compromise threaten the short-term practical interests of women or entail a cost that if not compensated for, in some way, will be regarded as a huge loss. (Kandiyoti, 1988) Similar to a 'patriarchal bargain' compromise, these women asked for a price on their invested time in the meetings and were not, in any circumstance, willing to give their time free of cost. They were even able to articulate their own demand in a way that would be acceptable to the project objectives, by reiterating that financial help would indeed help raise their 'voice'.

We urge the reader to pause and consider who decides that a woman's 'voice' or a demand is a legitimate one. Is it one which demands for equal rights in a political arena? Is it one that raises the issue of domestic violence and registers a complaint? Is it one that refuses to give her time free of cost and demands financial compensation in return from those in authority? We believe all three to be expressions of agency; empowered women articulating their thoughts and needs, doing what is necessary. It does not matter whether an act of agency falls into the preconceived categories of empowerment, it should be recognized as such: a woman negotiating empowerment.

Gender as a Source of Exploitation

The analysis of the findings has henceforth been provided in the shape of a case study¹⁰. This is a case study providing the description of an event orchestrated by a woman followed by an analysis. It showcases how she used her position during interaction with the development agency as a means to an end:

'The subject of this case study is a 3- years-old woman named "Uzma" (a pseudonym); an educated housewife (FA pass) with three children whose husband worked as a tailor. She lived with her family in Dhoke Khabba in one portion of a rented house and was not well off. She came to the Agahi centre one day, crying profusely, with her youngest son in tow. In her own words, she said that her husband beat her and turned her out of the house. She was incoherent and emotional, so it was hard to understand her, but she declared that he kept asking her for money, had sold all of her things, clothes and jewellery and she had had enough. He also hit her children. He tried to hit her in the stomach with scissors and she feared for her life as he had threatened to kill her. She had an air of helplessness, said that she wanted to leave him and was worried for her children's safety.

She went on to state, whilst crying, that it was an arranged marriage and she didn't have any parents to go to, she just needed the organization's help to stand on her feet so that she could put a roof over her children's head while she searched for a job. Everyone present at the centre sympathized with her and while promised to help her get divorce, told her that a temporary solution would have to be reached. They offered to take some groceries to her home as an act of appeasement in front of the husband, and act as a support group for Uzma, talk to him and calm him down. She protested, saying that escort to her home wasn't needed and that her husband would get angry. They assured her that she has the organization's support, and her husband will be held accountable if he tries to harm her in their presence or afterwards.

In the follow up of this domestic violence case, upon reaching her home, the NGO support group discovered that the woman made it all up. The woman owner of the house – as a neutral party - stated that the husband is a good man. Not only did they discover that it was a love marriage, but also that while the couple fought a lot, they were both to blame as she also raised her hands on him, to which he retaliated.

They also met the husband in question, who apologized to them for the inconvenience his wife had caused due to a personal dispute. He stated that he loved his wife very much and there are fights in every home. He may have shouted in anger, but he wouldn't hurt her the way she portrayed.

¹⁰ These findings were acquired through participant observation, and since the incident was experienced first-hand, rather than being coded from interviews, this form of qualitative inquiry better serves for clarity of analysis than the verbatims used previously. A case study simplifies data to be considered by the reader and illuminates meanings for evaluation, sometimes used as an end product of a field-based research. (Laws & McLeod, 2006)

Their daughter was also on father's side and said that he loves mother very much but they both fight a lot, and her mother gets very emotional. During these exchanges, Uzma was present but when asked to defend herself, didn't say anything and looked guilty.'

It was apparent that Uzma exaggerated a lot while telling her story and used emotional blackmail as an attempt to get financial assistance and groceries that she knew the organization was capable of providing her with. What she wasn't expecting was the escort to her home where the reality of the situation was discovered.

Analysis of the case study shows that Uzma exploited her gender and played the victim on a platform that she knew to be working for the welfare of women. She knew that she had the power of the first word, where everyone would believe her because she is the weaker gender. She exploited her position and her gender just because she was emotionally charged and upset. While it is impossible to know the real story of what happens behind closed doors, in this instance, Uzma's attempt at curating a situation to benefit herself, knowing where to go in order to be believed on sight and getting financial assistance in the process clearly depicts a woman who is well-aware of her rights, the law and specifically where to go for help. This exercise of agency – while unfortunate – is still a legitimate act of awareness and decision-making by a woman perceived to be submissive and subordinated in a non-western society.

Feminists have long been attempting to understand the ways in which women resist the dominant male order by redeploying the meanings associated with cultural practices for their own agendas. Agency can also be a slumbering ember that can spark to flame as an act of resistance when permitted by conditions. (Mahmood S., 2001) Ironically, as showcased in this case study, women also knew how to use their own gender's perceived weakness as a source of power to benefit themselves from opportunities offered as an attempt to empower them like the existence of the *Agahi* centre. Uzma wasn't a direct beneficiary as participant of the meetings, but she was aware of the existence of an NGO in the vicinity. Armed with this knowledge, she had the power to turn the situation to her advantage when the need arose, and she did, successfully negotiating empowerment of her own accord.

Thus, from using rent in demanding reciprocity and exchanging time for money to using their gender to make decisions that benefit them in their interaction with a women welfare organization, women of Dhoke Khabba exercised and negotiated empowerment in the public sphere in local expression of agency which needs to be recognized as a legitimate form of empowerment.

Conclusion

Empowerment, for all its controversial acclaim, remains the most favored of approaches for projects geared to bring women to the forefront and on equal footing with their male counterparts, especially in developing countries. Give them the power, they say, make them aware of what they can achieve, provide them the freedom and agency to choose, decide and act. We have tried to show that during this process of consciousness raising and awareness about women's empowerment other, just as legitimate, forms of empowerment were identified falling through the cracks, neglected and trivialized.

This article has not contested any form of empowerment, formal or otherwise. After all, there can be no 'wrong' way of empowering women. We have simply brought forward the concept of 'negotiating empowerment' where women, both in domestic and public spheres, live, interact and make decisions as a conscious realization of their own interests, without any outside

assistance. These instances where women show agency and negotiate empowerment on their own terms, are also a legitimate exercise of power, albeit other, indigenous and local, perhaps even peripheral. The assumption that women's own assessments could only be simple and uneducated manages to disregard the deeper meaning in their voices. In our attempt to bring forward these non-conventional forms of empowerment, we urge the contextualization of the empowerment discourse in Pakistan, concluding that even in apparent circumstances of submission and subservience, what seems to be compliance, is actually a negotiation.

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