The Meaning of Empowerment

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What does the word 'empowerment' mean when applied to women's position, rights and development? The Pathways of Women's Empowerment Research programme set out to map out the processes that have contributed to women's empowerment. Was that made possible by women's greater participation in paid work, or in political processes? If so, when does paid work become empowering, or how do we facilitate women's entry into political arenas? The research is part of an international consortium, based in various universities in Egypt, Ghana and Brazil. The Bangladesh project is based in BRAC University. In order to understand what works for women, we widened our parameters to look at the cultural construction of women. Who is this woman who is struggling to garner more power for herself and how does she understand empowerment?

The research has followed some well-trodden parts, such as looking at women's engagement with paid work. We are familiar with the queues of women walking to and from work in our cities. Do these women feel empowered and what does the word mean in this context? Despite the long hours of work, women feel that they had a greater say in household matters, and consider this a measure of empowerment. We have noticed other changes; for example, our work survey, covering 5198 women, revealed that there is a declining trend towards son preference, and even if they were to have only one child, 52 % of the women surveyed said that the sex of the child did not matter.

Similarly women's political participation depended on variegated factors, including family support and status. While we keep bemoaning the fact that women politicians are usually the daughters or wives of elite or prominent families, at the local government level, the sheer presence of so many women makes a huge difference in the way that women are perceived. Quotas for directly elected seats have brought many women into political limelight. And within these structures, women are learning to fight for recognition of their spaces, even when the going is not smooth.

It is within the most unexpected arenas we found women claiming empowerment. Our research also looked at women's day-to-day involvement with religion, guided by concerns that growing religiosity may result in the greater confinement of women. Religion seems to be playing an ambiguous role. While a surprisingly large number of women report feeling empowered through religion, others felt constrained and guilty when unable to follow religious dictates strictly. This is an arena that requires more research, as religion manifests itself not only in its extreme forms, but plays a vital role in the everyday lives of women. This engagement may be read to yield fresh meanings and force us to look at the ways that women's empowerment is driven along culturally defined lines.

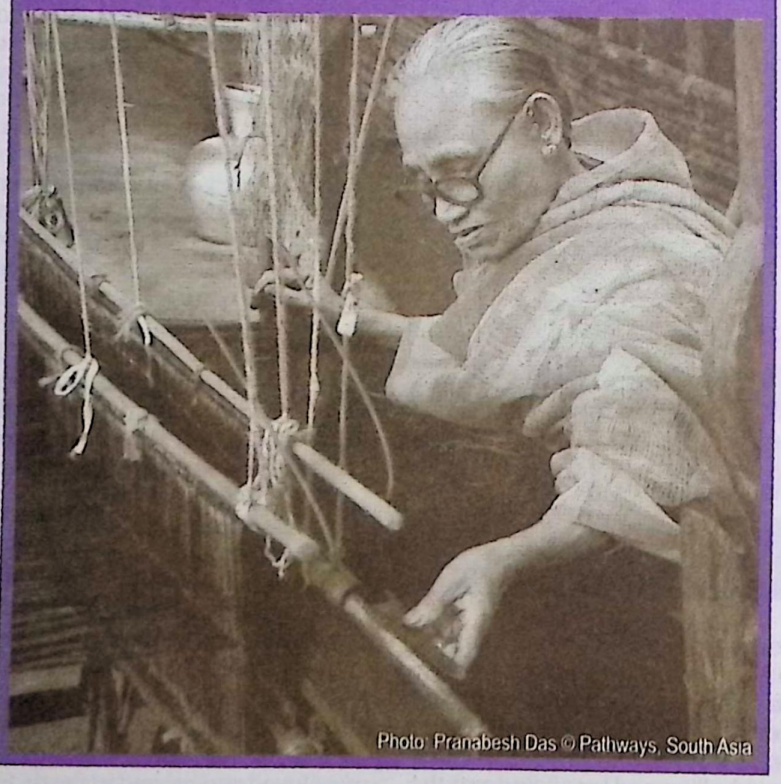


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The cultural realm indeed provided fresh insights into the way that empowerment enters into our daily lives. We watched television with women, and while we saw how women attach meaning and significance to images that may be seen as demeaning and objectifying, we also saw how dreams are created and lives lived around these images. The act of watching is empowering, transporting women beyond the confines of their existence and bringing the larger world within their ken. And we discovered that one of the things to watch out for is who controls the remote!

The research is pushing us to reexamine the word empowerment in new and challenging ways, to take it out of its more formal meanings and to look at the ways that women themselves understand the process.

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