Women's Empowerment in UN Documents neither a Safe Haven nor a Pandora's Box: Need for A Holistic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article is a critique on the UN – promoted concept of women's empowerment which is presented in the international instrument of women's rights, called Platform for Action, (1995) and which is reviewed since then for every five years. It is asserted in the article that though women's empowerment in the general sense of women's development and advancement is essential; but this UN-based concept of women's empowerment is constructed on a specific perspective, called 'gender perspective' which is problematic. Critical analysis of 'gender perspective' shows that heterosexual marriage, family and reproduction through marital union are all perceived as social construction and they are perceived as obstacles in the way of women's empowerment. It is therefore contended in the article that this concept of women's empowerment represents Western ethnocentrism because it ignores certain gender differences and their resultant gender roles and also overlooks the need for institutional agencies like religion and family which are necessary for legitimizing 'power.' It is asserted that all cultures should be given the right to re-conceptualize and pursue women's empowerment following their own perspectives based on their respective civilizations.

Keywords: Gender Perspective, Platform for Action, Patriarchal Perspective, Sexual and reproductive health rights, Religion, Family.

This article is a critique on the UN-promoted concept of women's empowerment. At the very outset, it seems pertinent to clarify that in this article we are not disclaiming or repudiating the concept of women's empowerment in its general sense of women's development and advancement. But we find problems in the UN- promoted concept of women's empowerment mainly because it is constituted and directed by a specific perspective, called gender perspective. For this reason, this UN-based concept of women's empowerment while emphasizing the equal power-sharing of women and men in all social structures rejects certain gender differences and their resultant gender roles and overlooks the need for institutional agencies necessary for legitimizing 'power', like religion and family. The article also draws the attention of the readers on another perspective, called the 'patriarchal perspective', one which exaggerates the gender differences between male and female for rigid demarcation of certain gender roles and discourage women's empowerment. Hence it is asserted in the article that there is a need to revise this concept while giving 'religion' and 'family' their due positions to make it moderate and holistic so that neither women's empowerment should be depreciated as an opening of a 'Pandora's box'; nor it should be extolled as a 'safe haven' for all the problems of women.

The Term Women's Empowerment in the UN Documents: Few Critical Reflections

Though discussions on the term, 'empowerment' in general may be traced back to 1980s, but the term 'women's empowerment' was brought to light in early 1990s (Sen & Grown 1987; Simon 1994; Batliwala 1994). However, this term attracted a global intellectual discourse ever since it is identified as an agenda of the UN international document for women's rights, called, Platform for Action, passed in the Fourth World Conference on Women, (FWCW) in 1995 in Beijing. The document states:

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The Platform for Action is an agenda for women's empowerment. (UN Department of Public Information 1996: 17) Since then, Platform for Action is revised and re-affirmed every five years and recently the UN celebrated its 25th Anniversary on 1st October, 2020 (Press Release UN High-level Meeting 2020).

The short history of this term within the UN discourse can be traced back to the International Conference on Population and Development, (ICPD) in Cairo, organized by UN from 5-13 September, 1994. In this conference, a document, called ICPD Programme of Action was passed for a comprehensive programme of development for all the countries across the world. In this ICPD Programme of Action the term women's empowerment is referred to conspicuously as part of reproductive health rights for the overall development of women. The ICPD Program of Action states:

> "The empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of their political, social, economic and health status is a highly important end in itself. In addition, it is essential for the achievement of sustainable development. The full participation and the partnership of both women and men is required in productive and nurturing of children and maintenance of the household.... In addition, improving the status of women also enhances their decision-making capacity at all levels in all spheres of life, especially in the area of sexuality and reproduction." (International Conference on Population and Development 1994: 12)

Later, as a follow-up of this ICPD Program of Action, a common framework was prepared called 'UNPOPIN and UNFPA Guidelines' on 11 September, 1995 in which the terms 'women's empowerment' and 'reproductive health' are defined and elaborated so that it may be used later for similar projects and documents, including Platform for Action. UN POPIN is UNITED NATIONS POPULATION INFORMATION NETWORK, and it is a part of UNFPA, UN Fund for Population Activities and its current name is UN Population Fund, with the same acronym, UNFPA. (From now onwards, we would refer to the UN POPIN AND UNFPA Guidelines as Guidelines only for the sake of convenience). The Guidelines has defined women's empowerment in the following words:

> "Women's empowerment has five components: women's sense of self-worth; their right to have and to determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally." (UN Population Division 1995: 1-11)

Similarly, later in other UN documents, the term women's empowerment is defined and explained in the same terms. For instance, according to the UNICEF, UN International Children's Emergency Fund) Glossary, "Empowerment of women and girls concerns women and girls gaining power and control over their own lives. It involves awareness-raising, building self-confidence, expansion of choices, increased access to and control over resources and actions to transform the structures and institutions which reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination and inequality." (UNICEF Glossary 2017: 1)

Prima facie it looks from the above definitions that women's empowerment is a genuine call of women for sharing equal power with men in all socio-economic and political structures which has been hitherto deprived to them by some institutions and social structures causing gender discrimination and injustices against women. However, critical reflections on these and such other definitions of women's empowerment show that it is a rudimentary and a mere tit-for tat solution, constructed on a cursory and a perfunctory analysis of the 12 critical areas of concern for women that are identified in the document --- poverty, education, health, violence, effects of armed conflict on women, economic structures, decision-making, insufficient mechanisms, human rights, media, environment, girl child. (UN Department of Public Information 1996: 34). Without making any in-depth analysis of these problems, the document presented the solution in its concept of women's empowerment as an international agenda.

We identify three major problems that are contained in this UN-proposed concept of women's empowerment. Firstly, while constituting this concept, religion and family are referred to in negative terms. Secondly, the empowerment theories focus only on power dynamics and power-sharing as a tit-for tat solution --- those who are disempowered should be empowered so as to address their problems. Thirdly, gender differences between men and women and their resultant gender roles in some areas of work are ignored and condemned in this concept of women's empowerment. All these problems are related to each other and they are elaborated as following:

UN-based Concept of Women's Empowerment is Built Perceiving Religion and Family in Negative Terms

It is crucial to note here that the document while stressing on equal power-sharing between men and women in social structures always referred to religion and family in negative terms as barriers in the way of women's empowerment. Few lines may be presented here in this connection:

> Although many women have advanced in economic structures, for the majority of women, particularly those who face additional barriers, continuing obstacles have hindered their ability to achieve economic autonomy.... women still also perform the great majority of unremunerated domestic work and community work, such as caring for children and older persons, preparing food for the family . . . (UN Department of Public Information 1996: 95).

At some other place, the document states: "Women may be discouraged from seeking political office by discriminatory attitudes and practices, family and child-care responsibilities ..." (UN Department of Public Information 1996: 10.). Along with family, religion and few other factors are mostly identified as barrier in the way of women's empowerment: Many women face additional barriers to the enjoyment of their human rights because of such factors as their race, language, ethnicity, culture, religion . . . " (UN Department of Public Information 1996: 124-125) Though power-sharing is important; but it should be framed while giving the social institutions like --- religion and family their due positions so that the 'power' should be checked from transgressing the moral limit and prove beneficial for women and society as a whole. Power-sharing by itself is not sufficient unless the power derives its legitimacy from the necessary institutions of the society.

Women's Empowerment Mainly Revolves Around Power-Shifting:

The whole discourse on the concept of 'empowerment' is centred on power dynamics and power-shifting focussing on the power relations among the concerned people. Naila Kabeer, defines empowerment in these words: "One way of thinking about power is in terms of the ability to make choices. To be disempowered means to be denied choice, while empowerment refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such ability. In other words, empowerment entails change." (Kabeer 2005: 13-14). Deepa Narayan in relevance to World Bank defines empowerment in these words: "Empowerment is the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives." (Narayan 2002: xviii). According to Srilatha Batliwala, empowerment concerns with how much influence people have over external actions that matter to their welfare (Batliwala & Chen 1994). Batliwala contends that empowerment is 'the process of challenging existing power relations and of gaining greater control over the sources of power' (Batliwala 1994: 129).

Based on such conceptions of empowerment, several definitions of women's empowerment are presented in contemporary times. According to Kabeer, empowerment should necessarily include that women should possess increased control over their own lives, bodies, and environments and that women should share equal power in the decision –making and should

enjoy economic independence (Kabeer 2012). Theory of women's empowerment as presented by Amartya Sen, and Martha Craven Nussbaum, focused on the capability of the concerned person. Capability here implies the capacity of a person to live a healthy and good life with all access to the resources of empowerment and freedom for active participation in decision making (Sen 1999; Nussbaum 1999; Walker & Unterhalter 2007). Batliwala (2007 & 2014) points out that women's empowerment is re-conceptualized in context with South Asia, which is elaborated in a document, called, *Women's Empowerment in South Asia: Concepts and Practices* (1993). She writes:

> The South Asia document defined empowerment as a process, and the results of a process, of transforming the relations of power between individuals and social groups.... The document defined empowerment as a process that shifts social power in three critical ways: by challenging the ideologies that justify social inequality (such as gender or caste), by changing prevailing patterns of access to and control over economic, natural and intellectual resources, and by transforming the institutions and structures that reinforce and sustain existing power structures (the family, state, market, education, media, etc.).

Critical insights into the above definitions of women's empowerment further strengthen our observation that this concept, women's empowerment mainly focuses on power-shifting on equal foot between men and women in all social structures without giving due place to religion and family. In fact, women's empowerment is measured on the levels of secularization a given society experiences. It is argued by some scholars that the more a society gets secularized, the more it manifests individualism and transforms from a traditional society into a modern society. In one of the works of Inglehart and Welzel, they argue that social units like church and family gradually lose their authority as a society treads the path of modernization emphasizing individualism and rationalism. It is pointed out that scholars who have worked with the World Values Survey, (WVS) identified close relationship between modernization and secular values and their impact on church and family institutions and on the measurement scale of women's empowerment. (Inglehart & Welzel 2005; Inglehart & Norris 2003).

Women's Empowerment is Built on Gender Perspective

One of the main reasons behind over-emphasis on equal power-sharing of women in all social institutions in this concept of women's empowerment while overlooking the gender differences and certain gender roles is the specific perspective, called gender perspective which is repeatedly highlighted in the Platform for Action. The concept of women's empowerment is not only constituted on gender perspective, but it is also directed through this perspective. Few statements may throw light on the co-existence of these terms throughout the document:

> The success of policies and measures aimed at supporting or strengthening the promotion of gender equality and the improvement of the status of women should be based on the integration of the gender perspective. . . (UN Department of Public Information 1996: 40).

In addressing the issue of mechanisms for promoting the advancement of women, government and other actors should promote an active and visible policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective in all policies and programmes (UN Department of Public Information 1996: 116). For a clear understanding of the term, 'gender perspective', we have to depend mainly on the discussions on the terms -- 'gender', 'gender –lens', 'gender perspective' that took place during Pre-Beijing NGO Conferences. It so happened that several Muslim and Christian women NGOs observed that the feminist scholars, leaders and some other women rights activist during the Pre-Beijing Meetings did not use the term, 'gender' in the place of 'sex'. Hence, they raised questions to the leadership of the conference to explain the meaning attributed to the term 'gender'. The conference leadership presented this definition: "Gender refers to the relationship between women and men based on socially defined roles that are assigned to one sex or the other." (Report

of the Preparatory Committee 1995; Kausar 2015: 125). It was how the Muslim and Christian NGOs learnt that the terms like gender perspective, gender lens, gender analysis etc are used in the document based on the arguments of radical, liberal, psychoanalytic and gender feminism and gender construction theorists who describe all types of 'gender roles' as 'social construction' and stereotypes (Kausar 2015: 118-171).

It needs to be made clear here that those who subscribe to such views on 'gender' and sex', they do not merely reject those supposedly roles of men and women as 'gender roles' which are generally constructed by society based on its rigid demarcation of distinct roles of men and women on the basis of few biased cultural assumptions like – man for the field and woman for the hearth. Unfortunately, most of the contemporary feminists and the social construction theorists include all those natural concepts of heterosexual marriage, hetero-marital family and even marriage-based reproduction functions in one big sweep as social construction. For instance, Berger and Luchmann in one of their works argue that marriage is a good example of a social order which is a human production and people have been producing it without noticing that they are the ones who are producing it as the desirable unit of the society. (Berger & Lukhman 2013: 1-14) According to a known psychoanalytic feminist, Nancy Chodorow, 'all sex-gender systems organize sex, and gender...' Chodorow further writes: "Heterosexual marriage, which usually gives men rights in women's sexual and reproductive capacities and formal rights in children, organizes sex. Both organize and reproduce gender as an unequal social relation." (Chodorow 1978). Therefore, gender perspective is also described as 'inclusive perspective' which "seeks to ensure that the human rights of every individual are respected, including equal rights for LGBT+ persons. It combats discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity." (Gender Equality 2017: 1).

All these show that gender perspective includes these two critical contentions --- that all gender differences and their resultant gender roles are socially constructed which includes heterosexual marriage, heterosexual marital family and marriage-based reproduction; that all sorts of sexual orientation and all kinds of sexual identities --- LGBTQI should be accepted and promoted without bringing the religious, moral and social questions. Furthermore, women's empowerment following the same spirit of the gender perspective demands sexual and reproductive health rights without mentioning 'marriage' as a necessary condition. This is the tragic flaw in this concept of women's empowerment that it neglects the necessary agency for legitimizing 'power' even in its demand for sexual and reproductive rights. (Ali 2017). The document states:

> The human rights of women include their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination in and violence. Equal relationship between women and men in matters of sexual relations and reproduction, including full respect for the integrity of the person, require mutual respect, consent and shared responsibility for sexual behaviour and its consequences (UN Department of Public Information 1996: 59).

The only emphasis is put on the 'shared responsibility' of the persons involved in matters of sexual relationship. What is this shared responsibility and what is its basis? All the wordings in which the sexual and reproductive health rights are framed are relative, vague and slippery with no solid grounds. It is crucial to mention here that it was mainly to support this kind of demand for sexual and reproductive health that this concept of women's empowerment is constructed and promoted. This can be understood from the following lines of the Guidelines of POPIN and UNFPA, prepared as a follow up of the International Conference on Population for Development, ICPD, Cairo in 1994:

> "One of the key actions needed to improve reproductive health is the empowerment of women especially through education." (UN Population Division 1995)

For the same reason, definitions of sexual and reproductive health were presented and elaborated in the ICPD Program of Action, Cairo in 1994 in these words: "Reproductive health therefore implies that people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide it, when and how often to do so." (International Conference on Population and Development 1994: 45). The same definition with the same words is used in the Platform for Action. (UN Department of Public Information 1996: 58). Besides this, mention should be made here of the reproductive health rights of adolescents which are elaborated both in ICPD Program of Action and in the Platform for Action. Following are the statements from Program of Action:

> The reproductive health needs of adolescents as a group have been largely ignored by existing reproductive health services. The response of societies to the reproductive health needs of adolescents should be based on information that helps them attain a level of maturity required to make responsible decisions. In particular, information and services should be made available to them to help them understand their sexuality and protect them from unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases and subsequent risk of infertility. This should be combined with the education of young men to respect women's self-determination and to share responsibility with women in matters of sexuality and reproduction (International Conference on Population and Development 1994: 58).

The same wordings are presented in the Platform for Action (UN Department of Public Information 1996: 58-59). Thus, in the whole discussion on sexual and reproductive health, no reference is made to marriage and marriage – based- family to legitimize the sexual and reproductive aspects of life of men and women. The only conditions mentioned are --- consideration of shared responsibility and respect to women's self-determination. It can be easily gleaned from the above discussion that women's empowerment being constituted on and directed through gender perspective, suffers from all these problems as highlighted above. However, before we present our suggestions to overcome the limitations of this UN –based concept of women's empowerment, we would like to say a few words on what may be called a 'patriarchal perspective' as opposed to the gender perspective.

Patriarchal Perspective Rigidly Demarcates Gender Roles and Discourages Women's Empowerment

At the outset we would like to clarify that the term -- the "patriarchal perspective" is not mentioned in the document Platform for Action and it is also not mentioned in the intellectual discourse on women's rights and women's empowerment. But there is a concrete and conspicuous discussion on the related terms like --- patriarchal norms, patriarchal traditions, patriarchal culture, and patriarchal interpretations of Scriptures etc in the literature on women's rights and women's empowerment as something detrimental for women's development and their empowerment (Kausar 2014; Kausar 2017; Berlas 2002; Friedan 2001).

The term 'patriarchy' has a long history that may be traced back to the book, *Patriarcha* by Robert Filmer (c. 1588 -1653) published in 1680. He was an English political scientist who defended the Divine Right of Kings. According to Filmer, the state in its initial stage was a family with father as the first King which implies that the mother and children of the family were the subjects of the father King. Furthermore, Filmer asserted that none including the parliament should scrutinize the authority of the King. This underlines the fact that women should remain subjects to men both in family and in state (Filmer 2015). This understanding of the term patriarchy confirms the etymological construction of the term, coined originally from the Greek word, *patriarkhes*, meaning father of a race. Literally, it implies a male-dominated family or state. However, such a subordinate image of women to men remained central in the Western political thought even from the classical to the modern period where woman is presented as an intellectually, spiritually and physically weaker person than a man and hence incapable for any active participation in state (Okin 2013). Besides western political thought, woman is portrayed

as a mere instrument, a helper of man in the Hebrew Bible which is followed by the Jews and the Christians. Sexuality under patriarchy in context with the Hebrew Bible is perceived as a male autonomy and female subordination to male. It is explained in these words: "In patriarchy, sexuality is organized around male pleasure. Woman is created for the sexual pleasure of man. A man has sexual autonomy; whereas female sexuality is possessed and controlled by the male. Male sexual desire for the female is represented as natural and enjoyable, while female desire is represented as unnatural and painful (Gen. 2–3). The roles of man and woman are presented in ways that inscribe male superiority and female subordination" (Mbuwayesango 2016).

From the above discussion, few important contentions of patriarchy may be highlighted like -- absolute male domination over female in family and in society and the distinct gender roles of women are not only different from the roles of male; rather they are secondary and subordinate to men. Based on these, we prefer to describe the perspective which bears these kinds of views as a 'patriarchal perspective'. Having said this, we argue that the gender perspective is constructed in reaction and in opposition to the above contentions contained in patriarchal perspective. Critical reflections on the patriarchal perspective would show that it is constructed more on the basis of some biased and misogynistic perceptions on women and less on the true meaning attached to the concerned Scriptures and to the un-biased and a righteous perception on family. Hence, we contend that patriarchal perspective on woman is a biased 'social construction' which needs a critical exposition and rejection. By the same token we assert that the gender perspective which is constructed in retaliation to the patriarchal perspective is a 'feminist construction' which also needs critical exploration and rejection. Hence, women's empowerment should not be conceived through these extreme perspectives. If women's empowerment is constituted and directed through the gender perspective, it extols the quantitative increase in the social participation of women as the only 'safe haven' for women; and thereby detaches them from religion and family and make them the victims of aimless bewilderment. Similarly, if the patriarchal perspective is followed, it condemns and repudiates even the reasonable increase in women's social participation as though it is like the opening of the 'Pandora's Box', and therefore glorifies women's internment within family. Hence women's empowerment needs to be revised based on a moderate and holistic perspective while giving religion and family their due positions in the framework which would thereby strike a balance in the reasonable increase in the 'quantity' of women's social participation with a good 'quality' life enjoyed by women, men and children in family and in society.

To conclude, women's empowerment, human rights, democracy and such other concepts seem to be good and welcoming; but it cannot be just one "Prophet" defining them. The current UN – promoted concept of women's empowerment echoes western ethnocentrism. Hence there is a need to re-conceptualize women's empowerment from holistic perspectives while giving due recognition to 'religion' and 'family', without which, a society, and a civilization would lose its meaning and purpose. There are few other scholars who also present similar contentions. Bahira Trask writes:

> Currently, a primarily Western conceptualization of social life emphasizes directing social initiatives, programs and policies at individuals." (Trask 2015: 2) She then suggests: "In our academic and policy orientations, we need to move away from a Western psychologically oriented lens that focuses primarily on the individual in society, to an emphasis on the role of the family unit (Trask 2015: 9).

We would like to end our discussion quoting Huntington (1996: 310) who somehow happened to say this: "In the emerging world of ethnic conflict and civilizational clash, Western belief in the universality of Western culture suffers three problems: it is false; it is immoral; and it is dangerous."

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