

Factors contributing to the Process of Empowerment of Professional Women

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Abstract

This paper attempts to study the factors contributing to the process of empowerment of professional women. In India, till last two decades, women were victims of widespread illiteracy, female infanticide, early marriages, violence and denial of individuality. Due to the efforts of government and non-government organizations and women movements the status of women in society is considerably improving. Today most of the women are dynamic organizers and are effective in various fields.

The study reveals that though professional women are doing well in their field they are facing various obstacles such as gender discrimination, economic difficulties, lack of family support, balancing family and career etc. and they are trying to overcome these obstacles. Their experiences in traveling the long path of life in reaching the cherished goal, can guide others. The study concludes by an observation that opportunities to education, desired professions, and support from family and community are the contributing factors to Women Empowerment.

Introduction

Globalization has provided various opportunities for the people specially women to build their own dreams. Women have demanded equality with men in matters of education, employment, inheritance, marriage, social and political status which were earlier perceived as male dominated fields. There is a certain segment of women which is successfully marching ahead and making a mark in all fields of life; literature, art, corporate world, media and medicine to name a few. In India, women are becoming increasingly visible and successful in the professional and public sphere. They are proving that they are not just bearers of children and homemakers. They can think, act and have their own choices. They are competent enough to participate in social, economic and political affairs as equals.

The World Bank (2002) defines empowerment as “the process of increasing the assets and capabilities of individuals or groups to make purposive choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes.” Here action is the centre of the empowerment process, actions that build both; individual and collective assets and improve the efficiency and fairness of the organizational context which govern the use of these assets.

Women Empowerment also leads to more economic benefits as their status changes from dependent citizens to independent citizens. They become independent in many aspects and thereby command respect. The money that women earn does not only help them and their family, but it also helps in poverty reduction.

Need of the study

Many studies have found that, there is a strong relationship between women's education and their empowerment. Education of women also gets affected by their family background, so socio-economic background affects the empowerment of women.

Women in certain occupations have a greater likelihood for empowerment and that various employment characteristics are associated with some of the indicators of empowerment. Women are dynamic organizers and are effective in various fields. Their experiences in travelling the long path of life in reaching the cherished goal, can guide others.

Empowerment is a process. It is important to understand the process of personal empowerment as experienced by women, particularly professional women and the factors contributing to their process of empowerment. Hence, the researcher tried to understand the contributory factors to the process of empowerment as perceived by the professional women.

Objectives of the study

To study the contributory factors to the process of empowerment of professional women as perceived by them.

In this study the researcher identified the process of empowerment of women of four professions using qualitative approach. The researcher considered qualitative approach would be more suitable for this study as it allows the researcher to explore perceptions, attitudes and motivations and to understand how they are formed.

Population

The target population for this study was the women from the State of Maharashtra from four professions; Engineering, Law, Medicine and Teacher Education.

Sampling procedure

Since the researcher wanted to identify the empowered women from the four professions, Engineering, Law, Medicine and Teacher Education she has selected stratified random sampling technique and selected fifty women from each profession, using lottery method resulting in the sample size of two hundred professional women. The Women Empowerment Inventory (WEI) was administered on them and the scoring was done.

Then ten women professionals were selected using maximal variation sampling technique five with highest scores and five with lowest scores from each profession totaling forty professional women for the purpose of understanding the process of empowerment.

Tools for Data Collection

1. The Women Empowerment Inventory (WEI)

A scenarios/situations based 50 items inventory was prepared by the researcher to identify the empowered professional women. Each scenario/situation proposed a hypothetical situation in the life of the professional woman. Each scenario/situation had five probable responses based on the five levels of empowerment order as stipulated by the World Bank; Passive Access, Active Participation, Influence and Control. No /less Empowerment was considered as the fifth choice. The respondent was asked to put herself in that situation and select one response which would be most likely her own response out of the five provided.

2. Standardized Open-Ended Interview Schedule (SOIS)

This tool was to identify the contributory factors to the process of empowerment of the professional women as perceived by them. So the first step was to select the appropriate aspects to be included in the interview schedule. The researcher framed one broad question and 2/3 supportive questions keeping scope for further probing. The interview was flexible enough to range over issues that the respondents brought up. The time was also kept flexible.

Procedure for Data Collection

The researcher contacted the sample individually and procured their consent to participate in the research and set time for interview. The researcher met the respondents at the appointed time and strived to make them feel at ease before beginning the interview. Every interview was recorded and was carefully transcribed after it was conducted.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using qualitative approach. The researcher analyzed the transcripts in a continuous process of reading and re-reading the transcripts to identify patterns of understanding and looked for text segments and words having similar meaning iteratively comparing them in order to identify the similarities and differences. The researcher developed a coding and category system and the transcripts were coded into subcategories and categories to determine themes.

Contributory Factors

Most of the professional women described the contributory factors to empowerment related to their profession. Some events or incidents seemed to play a crucial role in the empowerment of women, however some women could not describe them, especially the less empowered women. It appeared that they did not understand what to answer, may be because they were not aware or could not pinpoint or hesitant to share.

The responses of the participants to the factors in their life contributing towards empowerment were analyzed and the following codes were emerged:

- a. Opportunities to get the desired professional education
- b. Opportunities due to the profession and
- c. Support from family, friends and colleagues; financial and emotional..

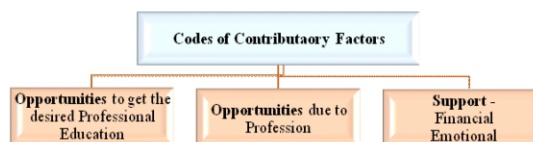


Figure
Codes of Contributory Factors

a. Opportunities to get the desired professional education

Most of the participants considered themselves empowered because of they were working in their respective professions. Many of them mentioned that getting admission in the desired field was the first step and an incentive for them to achieve their goal for which they studied very hard. For some, the government policy of reservation helped them in securing admission in the desired profession even though they could not compete in general category.

One of the highly empowered woman stated, “My dream from childhood came true as, I was very lucky to get admission in the medical course due to the government policy of reservation quota and now I am pursuing the career in the same field. I became more aware of my social responsibilities after started working as a doctor....”

b. Opportunities due to the profession

Most of the women started out their careers immediately after completion of their professional education and obtaining degree. Their professional degrees opened the doors to prestigious jobs. Few women reported that due to job opportunities they learnt many things that helped them to be good professionals. Some of them reported that due to their profession they got an opportunity to learn skills such as communication, problem solving etc. which helped them in their empowerment.

One highly empowered women stated, “Because of my professional education in a reputed institution, I came across various good career opportunities. I worked in many institutions and learnt many things, improving my skills because of the exposure and experience.

Some of the empowered women said that because of the opportunity to work in their desired profession they could do something for the society. They became more aware of their social duties. One of the highly empowered woman stated, “... because of my profession, I look at the different events in the life from psychiatric point of view. I look at the events without bias which gives me different perspectives about particular event. Curiosity, broad based thinking, openness of mind have given me intellectual strength. I respect and understand my obligation towards the society. These experiences also facilitated my growth in the profession”

Highly empowered women found many opportunities in their profession whereas less empowered women found less opportunities in their profession. One of the less empowered women stated, "...I found working at different shifts in the hospital was difficult. Also in my profession there is lot of discrimination and bias. I remember I used to come home and grumble about it. I finally decided not to work in the hospitals and I joined this clinic. Where I am handling my patients well."

c. **Support (Emotional and Financial from family, friends and colleagues)**

Human beings cannot live without association. They need support from others. All the women participants received support either from their family, friends or colleagues. Empowered women participants received financial as well as emotional support from their families and friends.

One of the highly empowered woman stated, "When I got divorced, my parents were not alive. I didn't get support from in-laws, but one of my friend supported me. She gave shelter to me and my children for some months and also encouraged me to study further. I selected law as I thought being a lawyer I would be able to help other people who are in need.

Some of the highly empowered woman agreed that because their husband or in-laws shared their household responsibilities, they became free to pay more attention to their profession without having to worry about their children or home. Due to this strong support they were able to concentrate towards their carrier. Particularly, the participants in the medical field have quoted that without the support from their family members, it would have been very difficult to succeed in their profession because of the demand of long and unpredictable hours.

One women quoted, "Because of the support from my husband and mother-in-law, I was able to attend international workshops and seminars abroad which helped me to grow professionally

"Even when the family obligations have come in their way to achieve their goals the empowered women are always been positive about it. One of the highly empowered woman stated, "I always had a dream of working abroad which remained unfulfilled because of my father's health problems. But I'm happy that I could take good care of my father till end".

Many of the women were belong to middle or low social background. Few women shared that their parents allowed them to take up the desired professional education though they belonging to low economic condition.

One of the highly empowered women said, due to my poor family background I studied hard and I got scholarship to complete medical education. One of the highly empowered stated, “When my husband threw me out of the house with three children I had no education, no money at that time. But I worked as a stenographer and earn money and looked after my children and also completed my law education.”

Whereas the researcher notice that if financial support was not there then low empowered women had not taken much efforts which helped them to become empowered.

Conclusion

In order to really bring women empowerment in the Indian society, it needs to understand the factors, which contribute to the women empowerment. This study focused on the process of empowerment of professional women. Opportunities to get the desired Professional Education, Opportunities due to the selected profession and the Financial and Emotional support from family, friends and colleagues were perceived as contributory to the empowerment of professional women.

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