

Women's Empowerment: At a Price!

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Listening to 'the story behind the story' and hearing the pain behind every success may be ways of validating the sacrifices that women across every strata of society make. Empowerment can only stem from this recognition of the inequalities inherent in the lives of men and women, in terms of responsibilities, work and sacrifices, and the appreciation for their contribution

Empowerment is a big word; more than that, it has a deep meaning. But do we really understand what it means?

Empowerment, as I understand it, means to take charge of one's life. And that whatever may happen in a person's life, he or she is totally responsible for it. The question that comes to mind is, "How does a woman become empowered?" By being strong, by being confident or by being independent?

Let us suppose that she becomes strong, independent and confident. She becomes a woman who takes her own decisions. She might no longer need to ask someone's permission before taking a decision. However, after she has taken a decision, what happens to her? Does she pay a price for her independence?

Women are the most targeted victims of this world. They have always been told what to do and what not to do. Has anyone asked them what they want to do? From the time of the birth of a child, we differentiate between a boy and a girl. Recently, I attended a workshop on gender, in which tribal and non-tribal women shared their life stories. The one thing which I noticed was that the identities of most of the women speakers came from the family they belonged to, and not from their own selves.

Each one of these women was working, either as a trainer or a group leader, and one was even a Board Member of a yarn producing company. From their sharing, however, it was clear that not much had changed in their lives. Each one of them may have come far and may have acquired a dignified life outside; but inside, they were still the same.

Society is usually very harsh to a widowed woman. Anita's case was no different. The women around her started to speak ill of her. She was forbidden to enter her own house. She realized that it is not easy to survive in this world alone

She replied, "I have faced a lot of difficulties, *didi*. I have worked and conducted trainings without food and water. I have gone to block offices and worked for the Federation for more than two years. I have dedicated my life to my work. Whenever I used to go out of my home, my children used to cry. *Mujhe accha nahi lagta tha* (I didn't like it). But what else could I have done? *Pet*

Each one of them had struggled to break out of the confines. Each had lived the life of a captive and had not been aware of her own value. What happens to such women when they step out of their homes? What happens when they return home late? Or what happens to their children when they leave them at home because they have a training to attend?

to bharna hoga na (I have to fill stomachs). I used to wear some ordinary clothes and used to get out of the house and then change into a saree somewhere on the way so that my children do not cry."

Do their husbands accept their moving about freely? Do they allow the women to go to places without their permission? Do they still abuse the women physically or verbally? And if they do, can we say that women are empowered? Are they happy? Have they made some compromises to become empowered? They may not be happy about the compromises they have made.

She was married at a very early age and had two children. After a few years of her marriage, her husband migrated for work and committed suicide. According to her, he went out of the village in search of work and somehow was entangled in a false police case. He got arrested and had taken a huge loan from money lenders; with these pressures later he committed suicide. After his death, people began to talk and blame Anita *didi* for her husband's death.

Let us take a look at some of these women.

Anita Dasi collects data of groups. Earlier, she worked for Cluster Facilitation Team (CFT). She became a trainer for accountants of groups and, today, she feels so confident that she talks with government officials without any hesitation. One day, when she was conducting a training, I asked her what her journey had been like and from where had she got so much courage.

Society is usually very harsh to a widowed woman. Anita's case was no different. The women around her started to speak ill of her. She was forbidden to enter her own house. She realized that it is not easy to survive in this world alone. She took training for tailoring and used to teach the local students Hindi for Rs 600.

In 2013, she joined the Nari Shakti Mahila Sangh (a block-level Federation), where she became a Board Member and a *panchayat* representative. She used to introduce herself

as, "Mera naam hai Anita Dasi. Main Inderbani gaon ke Murayam panchayat ki hoon aur main Nari Shakti Mahila Sangh ki sachiv ke pad mein hoon (My name is Anita Dasi. I am from Inderbani village in Murayam panchayat and I am the Secretary of the Nari Shakti Mahila Sangh)."

She reminisces, "I have earned a lot and lost a lot too. I have earned the respect of being a Board Member but I have faced disrespect too. I will not be able to forget how people treated me. I have come a long way from the situation that I was in. But I have missed a lot. I will never be able to see my children growing up again. I might have food sufficiency now, but I cannot feed my two children with my own hands. I have become a known woman, thanks to the Federation, but no one will ever know what I have gone through. Initially, when I was a widow to all, everybody criticized me. When I got involved with the Self Help Group (SHG), the people in my village passed comments about me. They used to say, 'Pata nahi kahan jaati hai aur kya karti hai (Don't know where she goes and what she does)'. They did not believe me. The *dadas* (men), especially, used to pass such comments about me."

Anita *didi* looked at me and said that during this difficult time, she thought that being a woman was so pathetic. The boundary that she was confined to suffocated her. She realized that it was important to break that boundary rather than sit at home doing nothing.

She, then, started to become involved in strengthening and nurturing of SHGs. Gradually, she entered this new world of SHGs, village organizations (VOs) and the Federation, where she nurtured herself as a leader. She told me that she got a lot of exposure to the outside world, working with SHGs and the Federation, and she was learning to be a better person.

Today, her identity comes from her work and not from being a widow, hemmed in by social boundaries. She is becoming more confident by the day and wants to join hands with the other *didis* in her village. I asked her about her motivation and she said, "Didi, aaj to main *bohut aagey aa gayi hoon apni pichhli zindagi se. Par jo mere aas paas didi rehti hain wo to nahi na aagey badh payi hain. Mere jaise kitni aise didiyan hain jo kabhi bank tak nahi dekhi hain. Kya mera farz nahi banta ki unko bhi aagey le kar aaun (Didi, I have moved ahead today from where I was earlier; but the other women around me have not moved ahead. Many women have not even seen the bank. Isn't it my responsibility to take them ahead)?*"

"Maybe they too face difficulties in their day-to-day lives against which they are unable to raise their voice. Society has made a *lakshman rekha* (boundary) around women and it is considered a sacrilege to cross it. We, as women, need to get out and break that boundary." Anita is proud of being a woman. "Mahilao ne is sansar ko banaya hai, aur ek mahila ke pas jo shakti hai wo puri duniya badal sakti hai (Women have created this world and the power of one woman can change the whole world). I have understood this from the ups and downs in my life and, therefore, I want to join hands with as many women as I can. I want them all to join hands with each other and make this land suitable to live in."

She became a trainer for SHGs and VO and later on soon she was visiting Ranchi and Deoghar for presentations. She got so many opportunities to step out and meet people that she became more confident day by day. Today she works as a social mobiliser and earns around Rs 6000 but money has never been her motivation. She says, "I know everything—'everything' means how to form an SHG, train the members of an SHG, vermicomposting,

agriculture, MGNREGA, and what not but I want to extend myself to others, *Nahi karenge to kaisa hoga didi* (If I won't do, how will it happen)."

I asked her whether during this journey of hers, she had ever felt sad about the sacrifices that she had to make. She replied promptly, "You know, when I was alone with my two children, everybody was against me. At that time, I felt the urgency of getting a job to feed my two children. Today, both my children are studying and they are proud of me. I did not care about the world. I did not care about what anyone was saying. I have listened to many abuses from men and from women too. People have slandered me. It never created any disturbance in me because I knew that, at the end of the day, when I went home after work, my children would be there waiting for me. My heart sinks when I think that besides paying for their necessities, I have never been by their side. When they needed the utmost care from their mother, they had to spend time with some other woman whom they did not know. I was constantly tense about whether they had eaten or not, slept or not, bathed or not. They have never complained about this to me, but I know that I have missed my children's childhood. I do not remember how I was as a kid, but my children have been the greatest support of my life."

She seems so confident today about her work that she is not hesitant at all to speak about what is right and what is wrong. Today, everything seems fair and just from the outside. It appears like she has gained so much, but no one talks about her losses. She had tears in her eyes when she spoke not because she was sad, but because when she thinks about her achievements she also thinks of her sacrifices.

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Whenever I see her, she smiles and greets my colleague, Sagarika, and me as if we are her sisters. But she has sad eyes. She is a woman in her mid-twenties and has a husband who works as a farmer. She is a non-tribal Christian woman who has been educated until Class IX. She got married at 16 and has a baby boy. Her name is Sunita Digal and, in 2014, she was chosen as an Agricultural Trainer by the Cluster in Rebingya village. She was the most educated woman in the village. Through consistent hard work, she trained two farmers and their resultant yield doubled. She then gained confidence and started encouraging other women to practice agriculture in an improved way.

She said she felt more confident now. She was anaemic because of which she often had concussions, sudden blackouts and other gynaecological problems. We talked about how nutrition is important for women and how eating healthy would help her.

After a while she said, "This is impossible, *didi*. There is a custom in my family that we can't eat anything before the men do. If I do, my husband may beat me." From this disclosure, I inferred that Sunita is independent enough to teach others to eat well; yet, within her own family, she cannot eat before the men and, if she does, she will have to pay the price by getting beaten up or being bad-mouthed by people.

From a distance, Sagarika and I see her preparing the bed for the brinjal and tomato seedlings. The heat is scorching and she is sweating, but she is there standing with the farmers spreading Di-ammonium phosphate (DAP) over the field and explaining the purpose to the villagers, looking at me apprehensively once in a while, worried that

she might say something wrong. I give her a reassuring smile and she continues with her work. After she finishes her work, we talk about the practices in the village, the customs, how a girl is treated in the village, etc. We talk about marriage, love, sex, childbirth, and customs, and the role of women in all these.

From the gender perspective, I realized that the most vulnerable section of the society, are women. Women have to sacrifice their self-respect, dignity, health and everything else related to them, just to satisfy the male ego. Sunita shared with us that after the birth of her first child, she did not want another because she was very weak and because there were some financial issues as well. Her husband agreed, but he did not want to use any protective measures, nor did he agree to be operated upon because, according to him, it was against his dignity and that he might lose respect in the village. Thus, the only way to stop childbirth was that she takes the precautions. So, she started taking the pill; however, the method she explained was different from the usual. There were two pills. She had to consume one, and insert the other into her body through the vagina. When the pill gets absorbed in the body, the conceived foetus gets aborted. This causes a huge amount of bleeding and the body becomes weak. And, therefore, she is suffering from anaemia and her body is weak due to the repeated use of these pills. She has frequent concussions too.

I ask her whether she has talked about this situation with her husband. She says, "Yes, *didi*. I did not want kids any more because it is difficult to give proper education and food to one child, let alone more. Also, my body is very weak. I have discussed this with

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my husband but he does not understand these things. He says, 'Everybody in the village manages, so why can't we?'"

In this village, on an average, a family has three or four children. One family had seven children. It was shocking to hear the pain Sunita went through; maybe all the women in the village suffer the same pain. Sunita is educated, works for her community, is a learner and

also teaches others. She earns for her family. Despite this, her opinion does not matter in her family. She seems to be just another empowered woman, without any power!

We work with women. We work for their empowerment and their livelihood. We sit in groups and talk with women, train them, work on several projects to reduce their drudgery and improve their living conditions. I wonder, however, if we are really doing anything to reduce their drudgery. Everything starting from drinking water to the Indira Awaas comes to their doorstep; yet, they do not know why a condom is needed or why girls should use sanitary pads and what happens when a woman loses blood and becomes anaemic. Even though she is the most educated person in her village, Sunita is paying the price. What will the situation of the other women, who are illiterate and have not been exposed to the outer world, be? Some women share their plight with us; however, there are many, who are still behind the curtain and are paying the price.

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Her *anchal* carelessly flows in the air as she runs towards her daughter. Her daughter doesn't want to have food. The little girl cries out loud, but her mother will not let her go.

She tells her stories, roams around the garden, carrying her in her arms, pointing at trees, birds, the blue sky so that she stops crying and eats something. The mother does not want her baby to remain hungry. That was many years ago.

Twenty-five years later, she is still dedicated to her daughter, having moulded the baby into a woman, who is now able to feed herself and stand on her own feet.

This mother has spent her whole life obeying everyone, acting on whatever others have decided for her. When she was a young girl, she wanted to dance, sing and paint her own world in a new colour. The family had other plans for her. She was to be married. She quietly accepted that as her fate. When she was getting married, her father told her that her in-laws home was her world from then on.

"You will have to obey every little word there," he told her and she obeyed.

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She was married when she was studying for her graduation. Since then, she has been juggling her life. She has been a wife, a mother, a daughter-in-law and has played almost every other role. She has always proved herself in every relationship, be it that of a daughter, a sister, a wife, a daughter-in-law, a mother or any other. She has tried to be perfect in all of them. She is capable enough to take her

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own decisions and is free to choose any path she wants. She is a multi-talented lady. She is an A-class singer. She has danced on many stages, performed in many plays. Her embroidery cannot be differentiated from the one bought from shops. But what did she miss?

She is an educated woman, she has a life, she has responsibilities, and she has sacrifices to make. I ask her what it is that she would like to do. She says, "When I was in college, I aspired for a job, but my father said that women are not meant to do jobs. So, I obeyed him. I graduated with a first class. Now, if someone were to hire me, I am not sure whether I will be able to do the work or not, but I wish, some day..."

She has spent her life caring for everyone and obeying everyone, but no one has certified her as a perfect daughter, sister, wife mother, etc. She adjusted to a new environment and new family but no one has credited her with being a perfect daughter-in-law or a good wife. It seems as if her dreams had been locked up in a small box and thrown far into the sea. A brilliant soul like hers was restricted by social responsibilities and, gradually, that became her life. She forgot about her dancing, her singing and her painting and, most important, she forgot what she wanted.

She says, "I have struggled a lot in my life. The path of my life had so many difficulties, so many twists and turns, yet I never lost hope. Today, I have a family, two daughters, a house, a husband, and a car but I own nothing. I am responsible for everyone but no one is responsible for me."

She raised some very pertinent questions that every woman asks of herself at some point.

She asked me, "I was born the same way that my brother was.

There was no difference between me and my brother; why then am I bound to keep a fast for him so that he can live long...and he is not bound to do the same? My husband and I both got married to each other and we both took vows for each other, why is it then that I change my name for his? Why am I the one to sacrifice my job for having his baby? Why am I the one to serve him when he is tired? Don't I get tired? Why am I the only one asked to keep quiet when these questions are raised?"

Today, her identity comes from her family. We say that educated women are strong, independent and confident. But I see something different here. I have known this woman for quite some time and I asked her what it was that she liked to do before and now you don't. She said, "I liked to dance, to sing, to draw, to read books, to cook and now I do not do any of them."

I asked her why she had stopped doing all those things. She replied, "I obeyed everyone. I am educated enough to stand up and teach my children. I am strong enough to carry my daughter in my arms and fight against the whole world. It was my choice to obey

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everyone and I have paid the price for it. My sacrifice may not be visible to anyone, but I know what I have given up. But I am happy that I have known so much."

Her name is Mamata Dutta and she is my mother.

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These are stories of three different women with different lifestyles and economic status; and each one has paid a price. When these stories are shared, these sacrifices and compromises (one side of the coin) are usually overlooked and the shiny side of the coin is admired, the side that shows success stories of a woman's journey. Stories of how a woman has grown. Those appeal to the audience more.

All success stories have a story of pain behind them. Can we just pause and listen to others' plight? Can we truly empathize with them and reflect back what they are saying? Empowerment only happens when both sides of the coin shine. Every woman is special and each one has her own story to tell. We can surely engage ourselves with their stories and hear their needs. To identify those needs, we have to hear both sides of the story, look at both sides of the coin, because EVERY SIDE OF A COIN HAS ANOTHER SIDE. There is always a story behind the story.