

46. Gender, empowerment and social innovation

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Outline of the topic

The study of empowerment is complex, conceptually underdeveloped, and operates across many subfields including sociology, psychology, social work, neurosciences, and organizational studies. It has strong ties to social justice and achieving personal agency and power. Feminist empowerment has been taken up by some fields, including social work, psychology, and anthropology, but there have been few interdisciplinary approaches. In innovation studies, empowerment is generally conceived from the perspective that social innovation can drive societal changes and empower various actors, including those who typically experience oppression. Feminist engagement with innovation studies is limited.

Conceptual overview and discussion

To understand women's empowerment, we must first understand the term 'woman'. The term woman (or women) may include female-identifying persons, women who do not identify with binary gender categorization, transgender, cisgender, or intersex individuals. Thus, the term woman is bound up in social and political discourse as relating to biological sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation. It is therefore both a biological, and social category but not explicitly either. Inclusive language and pronoun choice is a way to exercise agency and voice.

Empowerment has been theorized in research and practice as an interactive process with practical applications. It is considered central to the improvement of the human condition, often revealing environmental, social, economic, or political inequities. However, empowerment lacks conceptual clarity. It can be defined as a process of increasing personal and interpersonal power and influence, achieving both personal and collective efficacy. Understood as a processional concept, it involves progress against a stated goal in which personal power is increased and thus involves self-efficacy, knowledge, and

competence. Feminist models of empowerment also consider achieving personal goals alongside self-esteem and resilience. Some feminist models of empowerment see power as embedded in social relationships, social networks, and supportive groups, therefore linking it to collective, as well as personal, behaviour. In a collective model, empowerment becomes attached to larger social systems, community building, and relational action, including consciousness-raising.

Feminist engagement with innovation is concerned with social advances and discoveries that reconceptualize the relationship between gender and innovation with the goal of advancing the understanding of innovation from more marginalized perspectives. This focus brings an appreciation for specific identity groups and their context. Such approaches hope to address how systemic oppression is enacted in innovation contexts. Specifically, feminist analysis offers insight into how structural and institutional arrangements maintain or subvert taken-for-granted subject positions. Additionally, a feminist lens brings focus to industry and innovation which might otherwise ignore women. Innovation to drive women's empowerment is yet another sphere to examine, whereby women as advocates, changemakers and leaders critique and change industry that reproduces or reinforces gender inequality, and steer innovation in a direction that serves women.

Application

In the context of feminist research, models of empowerment are seen to reduce the distance between researcher and participant and contribute to a better understanding of subjective experiences and lived realities. In a practical context, empowerment translates to capabilities and capacities, and the reduction of structural barriers to independence and participation. As a result, empowerment is seen as paving the way to labour participation and economic potential, particularly for women.

Applying a gender lens to social innovation to promote women's rights and equality is emerging, and the International Centre for Research on Women is one of the few organizations to produce scholarly research about how social innovation can empower women. Women's empowerment and social innovation intersects in three areas: technology use, changing social norms and economic empowerment or resilience. Each of these

intersections emphasizes progressive social change to address a radical and challenging concept, namely, how to achieve gender equity.

Gender equity is directly related to poverty reduction, particularly in the Global South and Africa. Female agency, empowerment, and equality are all seen as potential solutions to poverty and privation. However, these ideas also need to consider historic and ongoing gendered disadvantages and the lack of widespread fundamental human rights, including healthcare, asset ownership, self-determination and more. Women are not an ‘untapped resource’; they are historically and systemically exploited and oppressed. Social innovation can function as a bridge to create change as a form of inclusive innovation, but to serve gender equality and women’s empowerment, it can also be represented as basic innovations that benefit women and women’s well-being, such as health, nutrition, income and/or quality life.

The collective and relational models of empowerment have the potential to improve both personal and collective well-being, and enhance participation in social, economic and political systems. Supportive networks can organize, advocate and educate. Such efforts can develop vital capacity in communities and organizations and challenge injustice. However, the empowerment of women must first acknowledge the ongoing constraints of traditional social and gendered norms (e.g., gendered roles and unpaid labour), persistent structural barriers (economic, social and political), discriminatory systems and the broad and continued exploitation, poverty and violence women face daily worldwide. With an appreciation for situated knowledge and context, the empowerment of women can equate to the capacity for a different and more improved position and a change in the perception of what women can be and do.

Critical summary

Investing in women is the key to stimulating economic growth but also global equality.

Women are not afforded the same standards of physical and mental health, access to education, competitive or equal compensation, nor do they participate equally in a variety of sectors, or governance or leadership roles. Despite hard-fought movements for equality, voice and agency, the prevalence of sexual and gender-based discrimination and systemic barriers remain. The United Nations reported that women only occupied 28 per cent of management roles worldwide in 2019. In 2020, the UN reported that women were significantly underrepresented in pandemic-related leadership roles, occupying only 25 per cent of national parliaments and 36 per cent of local government. Feminist engagement with innovation and innovation studies has the potential to lead to more focus on conditions which inhibit or enable women. Innovation to serve women’s empowerment has the potential to drive social change, from basic human rights to women being significant players in innovation and industry.

Further readings

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