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**EMPOWERMENT**

# Shades of Empowerment



Manan Morshed, from the series Leftover Stories, acrylic on paper, 2016

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How do we define empowerment? What is it like to feel empowered? Is it possible to feel empowered, all the time?

Empowerment these days is a buzzword for development practitioners (including myself), the unquestioned “good” aspired to by women in local communities and grassroots levels. The development discourse around empowerment has encouraged a rather romantic equation between empowerment, inclusion and income. There are various methodologies to measure empowerment—UNDP's Gender-Related Development Index and Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM); OECD's Social Institutions Indicator, the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index and the World Bank's economic empowerment through Smart Economics by making markets work for women.

But do these frameworks address the complexities of what this word entails?

Empowerment is a process in that it is fluid, often unpredictable and requires attention to the specificities of struggles over time and place. Success stories show lower-income communities climbing the ladder to salvation, which is presented as a stable platform from which there is no fall. The daily tug-of-war between exerting and surrendering one's self that women go through is not represented.

On their wedding night, 16-year-old Ayesha, living in Beguntilla slum of Dhaka, handed her husband a condom. He refused to wear it.”Why would I not enjoy it with my wife, it's not like I am going elsewhere”—was her husband's rationale. He also reasoned that he wanted a child, and a child would cement the marriage and help her in-laws look favourably upon Ayesha despite her dark complexion. The next day, Ayesha went to a local pharmacy and bought her first birth-control pills. Since then, she has regularly been taking them in secret, keeping it hidden from her husband and in-laws.

“I keep them under my pillow, they don't need to know,” she says to me with a big smile.

To add a little bit of context, Ayesha is an orphan, who attended four years of madrasa schooling but dropped out due to incidences of sexual harassment from the hujurs. Regardless of the myriad 'vulnerabilities' of being an orphan, a school dropout, a victim of early marriage with no earnings of her own, we see her asserting agency in deciding to use birth-control measures.

Fascinating? Yes. But what is more important to understand is the manner in which she achieves it. Keeping the information hidden is a manifestation of the power struggles within the household. It reflects the pressure on girls to maintain social norms and her defiant efforts to carve out a space within the social and gender limits of her daily existence.

What was the nature of negotiation between her and her husband on their mutual sexual relations? None. What consequences does this have in changing or reinforcing women's gender and class positions in society?

Mou, a 22-year-old unmarried garments-worker living in Bhashantek slum, shares her perceptions of marriage: “I just don't like the idea of marriage. I wouldn't be able to spend my own money without the husband's permission. How is that fair?”

After losing her father at the very young age of 13, she dropped out of school and, using fake birth certificates, started work as a temporary worker at a local garments factory. Since then she has been the sole breadwinner of the family, looking after her mother and two younger brothers who are now in classes five and eight respectively. She aspires to “buy land in the village and build a house for ourselves so we don't always have to live here”—something she thinks her father would have done for the family had he been alive. Towards the end of our conversation, as I ask questions around what kind of traits she desired in a husband, Mou pauses for a few seconds and says: “I wish for a rich husband, so I wouldn't have to work again a single day of my life.”

The progressive-minded, first-world educated woman in me was quick to judge Mou; researcher bias, of course! Her strong leadership of the household and her paternalistic aspirations had seemed inspirational. I had decided she was the success story of empowerment. But the researcher in me had other questions. Did earning an income make Mou feel empowered? What did empowerment mean to someone like Mou, who had almost skipped adolescence and jumped right into adulthood to take the reins of a struggling family? She considered “not having to work” a luxury, despite the financial freedom it allowed her. Clearly my definition of empowerment was not necessarily hers too.

20-year-old Laboni is an unmarried girl receiving training as an apprentice at a mechanic shop under the skills development programme of a local non-profit. The common understanding is that encouraging girls like Laboni into previously gendered occupations is considered empowering. But Laboni's insecurities lie elsewhere. By being trained as a car mechanic, she is practically entering a male-dominated workplace without any promise of workplace safety or security. Her mobility, to and from the workplace, exposes her in the public sphere in a manner that is outside her comfort and control.

In her own words: "...I recite Surahs every time I see a shadow behind me at work. In the mornings I come to work with a group of girls from the slum, and my father picks me up in the evenings. But the days he's late, I get so nervous. Maybe I should have chosen parlour training like the other girls.'

Laboni is an example of many such young girls who have changing aspirations owing to the numerous NGO programmes that seek to empower women by offering livelihood training and skills development. The underlying assumption is that empowerment is an economic issue, separate from politics. But we forget; empowerment is hardly that simple or linear. Understanding and facilitating women's empowerment requires a nuanced analysis of power struggles within the household, within communities, and within gender roles. While providing education and opportunities for employment are certainly steps in the right direction, we also need to think about ensuring necessary infrastructure: providing safe spaces—physical and emotional, public and private, workplace and home—for these young women who dare to challenge gender norms through their occupational and personal choices. Essentially, we need to rethink programming as long-term multi-layered approaches for normative change interventions.

Is empowerment always a simple social attribute? No. It is also not a constant state of mind. Just because I feel empowered right now does not mean I will feel so tomorrow. It is messy. It is fluid, pouring through complex societal structures bending along rigid social norms and changing course to accommodate influences of urbanisation, digitisation, industrialisation, etc.

To understand how heterogeneous our lived experiences are, and to truly understand the shades of empowerment, we need to look beyond the narrow, constricted definitions out there. Regardless of which socio-economic strata we belong to, in one way or the other, we are constantly negotiating the boundaries and parameters of our existence, be it around dress codes, mobility, how long to stay out, how to behave... the list goes on. It is time we have a more honest conversation about the nuances of empowerment, and not just through an economic lens but also from a gender and rights perspective.

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