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# Empowering women through education: Experiences from Dalit women in Nepal

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### ABSTRACT

In the international arena education is often put forward as the main strategy for achieving women's empowerment and gender equality. However, exactly what it means to be empowered and how education interacts with different aspects of empowerment remains ill-defined. This paper explores empowerment as experienced by educated women from a disadvantaged socio-economic background in Nepal. It examines how family relations and social expectations can constrain or promote feelings of empowerment. It is argued that, although education is potentially a powerful empowering factor, it cannot be viewed in isolation from social influences and intimate relations most important to women's lives.

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## 1. Introduction

In the international development arena the empowerment of girls and women is a goal that enjoys broad support. Many would agree that educating girls is potentially the most effective strategy to accomplish it. However, exactly what empowerment entails and how precisely education relates to it is less clear.

Starting in the 1990s, the Education For All (EFA) movement has advocated for education as a basic human right, with a particular focus on inclusiveness and gender equality. The 1990 World Declaration on Education for All that came out of the EFA World Conference in Jomtien stated that 'education is a fundamental right for all people, women and men, of all ages, throughout our world.' (UNESCO, 1990: 2). Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) 2 and 3, of achieving universal primary education and achieving gender equality, have also put gender, education and empowerment firmly on the international agenda. An assumption, however, that often seems to be made is that there is a simple direct relation between formal education and empowerment. Putting girls in school is considered the ultimate empowerment solution. This assumption is reflected, for example, in the fact that the only target under MDG3 (promote gender equality and empower women) is

eliminating gender disparity in education (Millennium Project, 2014). There is however no discussion on why/how this will result in the global empowerment of women.

Indeed, the MDGs have been much criticized for addressing numbers only while failing to engage with, and transform gender bias (Leach, 2000; Arnot and Fennell, 2008). Promoting a more nuanced view of girls' education, the EFA Dakar Framework for Action in 2000 stated that 'merely ensuring access to education for girls is not enough'. The framework included calls for quality education and gender sensitive approaches that also ensure equal treatment *within* education and address discriminatory social attitudes and practices (UNESCO, 2000: 17). In the academic sphere too, there have been strong calls to move beyond the focus on mere parity in the numbers of boys and girls attending school. Some topics that have received attention include the need for gender sensitivity and equal treatment within schools (Aikman et al., 2005; Subrahmanian, 2005); discussion on what a quality and/or empowering education actually consists of (Tikly and Barrett, 2011; Rao and Sweetman, 2014); and concerns about the ability of the education sector to truly challenge gender inequalities and transform the lives of girls and women (Chisamya et al., 2012).

Questions about the empowering potential of education are complicated by the fact that the term 'empowerment' is difficult to define. As much as it receives wide institutional support, it is not always clear exactly what its supporters advocate for. 'Everyone', as Cornwall and Anyidoho (2010: 144) put it, 'can find something in the term that resonates with the world as they would like to

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make it'. The answer to the question whether education empowers women of course depends on how one defines 'empowerment'. Authors on the subject mostly agree that it is a multi-dimensional process (Stromquist, 1995; Cornwall and Edwards, 2010; Kabeer, 2011; Hashemi et al., 1996), but the different dimensions can be variously defined. A distinction is often made between extrinsic control, or control over one's material environment versus intrinsic capabilities and positive self-perception (Sen, 1997: 2). Stromquist (1995, 2006) has divided empowerment into four different aspects: psychological, cognitive, economic and political. Attempts have also been made at developing more or less measurable indicators for empowerment (see for example Hashemi et al., 1996). This may include factors such as mobility, the ability to make purchases and involvement in major household decisions. However, with such measurable approaches it remains unclear how the things that are quantified actually relate to the subjects' lives and experiences.

Various researchers have raised the question what it really means to women themselves to be, or to become empowered. They argue that women's lived experiences need to be the starting point for defining empowerment. They have concluded that empowerment is likely personal, context-specific and path-dependent. This also makes it somewhat unpredictable and impossible to encapsulate in one standard definition. In practice it also means that important aspects of women's empowerment experiences are easily overlooked (Cornwall and Anyidoho, 2010; Cornwall and Edwards, 2010; Kabeer, 2011; Robinson-Pant, 2000).

Those who consider individual lived experiences important for empowerment research, do not necessarily deny that individual experiences are linked to social structures. Jackson (2006) speaks of the feminist concept of 'the person embedded within social relations of constraint'. It is a view in which the person is:

'simultaneously individual and social, invested with agency but also constrained by social relations, and experiencing well-being which is both personal and conditional on the well-being of significant others' (Jackson, 2006: 543).

While earlier feminist views often put individual autonomy at the heart of women's empowerment, it has since been argued that individual autonomy is not universally valued. Authors underline that the individual is by nature social and connected to the people around her. While the social is often accused of 'constraining' the individual, social connectedness is also a necessary part of women's lives and identities (Jackson, 2006; Kabeer, 2011). Cornwall and Edwards (2010: 4) further argue that the focus is usually on individual self-improvement or on society-wide economic change while in fact 'women's lived experiences of empowerment cannot be understood adequately by approaches that atomize women, abstracting them from the social and intimate relations that constrain and make possible their empowerment or disempowerment'.

This paper will examine these social and intimate influences, and the way they interact with empowerment, as experienced by educated women in Nepal and with a particular focus on women's relationship with their parents. It is based on a research that investigated if and how young Nepalese women from a low socio-economic felt education had empowered them, and what exactly empowerment meant to them. It also explored the limitations of the empowering effect of education. While it is recognized that in Nepal, as well as across the world many girls still lack access to school, this paper looks at the experiences of women who did get unique educational opportunities, in theory moving from a disadvantaged and disempowered situation to an empowered one.

The original research explored a variety of empowerment aspects and experiences, based on the four aspects of empowerment as

defined by Stromquist: *psychological* (feelings of self-esteem and a sense of agency to improve one's situation), *cognitive* (critical understanding of one's gendered reality and the injustices in this reality), *economic* (the capacity to generate an independent income) and *political* (awareness of power inequalities and the ability to organize and mobilize) (Stromquist, 1995, 2006). However, this paper focuses on social and intimate relations highlighted by Cornwall and Edwards (see earlier in this paragraph).

For the purpose of this paper, social context or social influences are defined as intimate relations as well as broader social norms that influence women's lives. Three aspects in particular stood out in the research, while relatively little described in other empowerment research: parents, the social context of job and income, and the social institution of marriage. The study was largely based on interviews with a small sample of 23 women from a disadvantaged socio-economic background, with intermediate<sup>2</sup> to high levels of education. The fieldwork took place between July and October 2011 in and around the Kathmandu Valley.

## 2. Research context and approach

The expansion of public school facilities in Nepal was initiated in the 1960s and 70s, supported by international aid. Between 1980 and 2013 the youth literacy rate (ages 15–24) has risen from less than 50% to over 88%. A net enrolment rate of 95.3 was achieved for primary education, with a gender parity index of 0.99 (Government of Nepal, National Planning Commission & United Nations Country Team of Nepal, 2013). However, the survival rate to grade five is low at around 62% as of 2009 (UNESCO, 2012). Moreover, access and enrollment varies between and within regions and groups; and almost one-fourth of children from the bottom consumption quintile remain out of school (Government of Nepal, National Planning Commission & United Nations Country Team of Nepal, 2013).

In higher education, girls (women) account for around 41.8% of enrollments. The overwhelming majority of these girls are enrolled in general education (91.6%), leaving only 8.4% in technical education (University Grants Commission, 2012). The number of highly educated women from a low socio-economic background is particularly low. Dalits (historically also referred to as untouchables) are at the bottom of the Hindu caste system. Although the caste hierarchy was officially abolished in Nepal in the 1960's, Dalits are still found lagging far behind in economic, social and political indicators. Bhatta et al. (2008), in a study at Tribhuvan University (which accounts for 86.7% of students in the country) found that Dalits made up as little as 1.4% of the university student body even though they form over 12% of the total population. Out of this 1.4%, only 30% were females. However, analytically speaking these educated women form an interesting group. They are women who have supposedly moved from the most un-ideal, disempowered situation, to the projected ideal of the educated and (therefore) empowered woman.

As the main research strategy for this study, 23 semi-structured interviews were conducted with educated Dalit women. They resulted in rich transcripts that became the main body of data on which the analysis is based. The underlying assumption was that, while outer circumstances can contribute to, or take away from empowerment, being empowered, having a sense of empowerment is a subjective experience. Therefore, individual women and their subjective experiences are the most important source of relevant information about empowerment. As a complementary method, four interviews with NGO workers involved in education and women's empowerment were conducted.

<sup>2</sup> Intermediate education refers to post-secondary education at pre-university level (classes 11 and 12, also known as +2, in the context of Nepal).

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