Empowerment of Rural Zulu Women through Popular Adult Education in South Africa: A Case Study of the National Association for Women=s Empowerment (NAWE) Program in KwaZulu-Natal

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Abstract: This paper reports the study on grassroots Zulu women in the NAWE program. The purpose was to investigate whether the women were empowered. The research question was: Are the women empowered, if so, in what ways and how do they define empowerment? Methods of data collection included interviews, participant observation, and document analysis.

Introduction

Empowerment is a buzzword in the discourse of women and development, Adult Education, and Feminist Scholarship. However, theories of this concept in the existing literature are fragmentary and lack a cohesive structure to give a clear definition of what empowerment means. This paper argues that a bottom-up approach that involves learners in determining what empowerment means and how it could be attained maximizes opportunities for developing a more precise model of empowerment. This paper comprises the final section of the case study that was conducted on grassroots Zulu women who participated in the National Association for Women's Empowerment program (NAWE) in South Africa. The goal of the study was to investigate whether the grassroots women were empowered. The research question was: Are the women in the NAWE program empowered, if so, in what ways? How do they define empowerment? What factors promote or limit their empowerment?

Methods of Data Collection

The research design was an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Methods of data collection included semi-structured, open-ended interviews (Stake, 1995; Bogdan and Biklen, 1992) with sixty five women, participant observation

(Reinharz, 1992; Fetterman, 1989), and document analysis. Data analysis involved grouping and developing categories out of emerging themes (Tesch, 1990; Marshall and Rossman, 1989). These themes later became chapters of the dissertation.

Findings of the Study

The findings revealed that factors of race, gender, and class intersected and fed on each other to oppress the participants in the NAWE program. The women and leaders identified five roots of oppression, the feminization of poverty; domination, exploitation, and marginalization; educational deprivation; violence; and cultural oppression. They also identified five paths to empowerment. However, the views of the women and leaders differed with regard to how

poverty and cultural oppression were to be addressed. The perceptions on empowerment by the women and leaders also differed.

Alleviating Poverty

The escalating rates of poverty among the women, in particular black women in South Africa has been documented (Department of Welfare, 1996a; The World Bank, 1994). According to the report by the Department of Welfare (1996a), there is a link between the growth of poverty and the vast number of 67 percent of poor female-headed families in KwaZulu-Natal. Many women in this study believed that the sources of their poverty were migrant labor, widowhood and unemployment, and polygamy. Some women narrated how as single heads of families they struggled to make ends meet. On the other hand, the leaders believed that the source of women's poverty was lack of access to mainstream economy.

Empowerment. It was the belief of all the women that learning income-generation skills enabled them to gain money that in turn alleviated their poverty. Consequently, the women engaged in activities such as sewing, shoemaking, crafts, soap-making, candle-making, and floor polish-making. Although these skills were meant for generating income, the women said they also found them useful in fulfilling their household roles. The women asserted that the income they generated enabled them to provide for the needs of their families. For other women, gaining income brought with it changes in their economic status as they became self-sufficient. For the women whose spouses were working, the income they gained supplemented that from their husbands and also freed them from dependency on men. Although the leaders agreed with the women that income generation skills alleviated poverty, they also thought that women's access to mainstream economy was the solution to their poverty. Hence, they lobbied for bank loans that had prevalently been unavailable to poor women during the apartheid era. The leaders attested to two forms of transformation that they saw in the women. One was reversal of traditional roles between women and their spouses and children. Another transformation was economic independence and autonomy that the leaders said allowed the women to make informed decisions about their income.

The women, on the one hand, identified four obstacles to their empowerment. One was prejudice by society, which the women argued was reflected in the way that the society, in particular men, looked down upon their work. Men's superego made them to be reluctant to purchase clothing from the poor rural women. Lack of infrastructure where the women would sell their work meant that the women had to spend time selling their work from house to house or on the streets when they should be attending the program. Lack of financial resources to purchase equipment and materials was another obstacle to women's income-making business. Household drudgeries such as plowing fields, collecting firewood and water, and caring for the children and the elderly hindered the women's progress. On the other hand, the leaders identified patriarchy and cultural stereotypes as playing a significant role in domesticating the women. They argued that some women were still tied to traditional norms that required them to give their income to their spouses who had to decide how it had to be spent. Like the women, the leaders also perceived lack of funding as a big obstacle to women's empowerment.

Addressing Domination, Exploitation, and Marginalization

The women attributed domination, exploitation, and marginalization to factors of race, class, and gender. Racial domination manifested itself in the way that some Indian and white businessmen dominated the business of sewing school uniform for black children, a business that the women believed rightfully belonged to them. The women also complained that some black school principals colluded with Indian businessmen by accepting bribes of cheap dress suits and by forcing black students to wear expensive factory-made school uniforms. The director of the program, on the other hand, used her class advantage in exploiting the poor women. She bought bulk beads and asked the grassroots women to make beadwork for her that she later sold in Europe at a high cost. She also bought the women's crafts cheaper and sold them in Europe at exorbitant prices.

Patriarchal hegemony manifested itself in three ways: some men made it difficult for the women to go to the learning program by making unreasonable demands; others deliberately and without consent wore the clothes that were meant for generating income; and internalized oppression made some in-laws and women in the community to collude with men in looking down and criticizing the participants. The women felt that the attitudes of the society had to change.

Empowerment. Both the women and leaders agreed that the women's collective action on demanding sewing contracts from black school principals eliminated their exploitation. They also agreed that refining the women's sewing skills had allowed the women to compete with their Indian and white business counterparts. Also, the women felt that engaging in entrepreneurship and in non-traditional activities such as shoemaking, which they said were both traditionally appropriate to men, empowered them. They also strengthened their women-only program with the belief that by excluding men, they were avoiding potential domination by men. As a result of the changes that had occurred in their lives, the women began to perceive themselves as agents of transformation. They said that learning in the program emancipated them from performing all the household tasks. Being away from home during the day had taught their children and husbands to do things on their own. The women also attested to their superiority to men and said that acquisition of traditionally male-appropriate skills had set them far beyond men.

In spite of their accomplishments, the women still felt that men were acting as gatekeepers especially in the sphere of entrepreneurship. Men were still in charge of controlling resources everywhere, in financial institutions, in the offices of the donor agencies, and in the local government, which made it difficult for the women to obtain resources that they had hoped would maximize their efficiency in running their businesses. Gender stereotyping was still prevalent among the Zulu society, as was shown by how some men, in-laws, and other women in the community treated the participants.

Redressing Educational Deprivation

Both the women and leaders agreed that gender, race, and class played a tremendous role in fundamentally depriving the women of educational opportunities that would develop their life skills. Three reasons accounted for this lack of education by the women: negative societal stereotypes about educating women, low socioeconomic class, and racist apartheid laws which prohibited some women from attending white neighboring schools.

Empowerment. The program redressed the women's lack of skills by providing instruction on these areas: basic healthcare, AIDS, and nutrition. The women asserted that the skills that they learned enhanced their self-esteem and helped them discover themselves and their potentialities. However, the women were concerned that the program did not provide instruction on the 3 R's, which they believed were essential to their empowerment.

The women complained about irrelevancy of some skills that they had acquired. For example, because of lack of skills they could not read the recipe book of traditional meals toward

which they had made significant contributions. Lack of participation in curriculum policy-making prevented them from expressing their aspirations, such as their wish to learn the 3R's.

Addressing the Problem of Violence

The prevalence of violence against South African women has been widely documented

(Wakin, 1999; Agenda Focus, 1994). It is important to understand violence against women in terms of the broader South African societal context in which a culture of violence is overwhelmingly high and in which violence against women is sanctioned by a sexist and patriarchal society. An estimated one million women are abused by men in KwaZulu-Natal in a year (Padayachee & Manjoo, 1996). The South African Crisis Centre in Esikhawini where this study was conducted reports that approximately 150 cases of domestic violence were reported between September and December of 1995. A woman is raped every 83 seconds in South Africa and that black women are particularly vulnerable to rape and abuse (The Agenda Focus, 1994). The participants in the NAWE program were no exception to all these forms of violence.

Empowerment. As an attempt to combat and raise awareness about violence against women, the grassroots women ingrained anti-violence messages on beaded necklaces, waistbands, and headbands. One of the messages that caught my eye was written in Xhosa, one of the native languages in South Africa. The message read, *"indoda okwenyani ayimbethi umkayo,"* which meant "a true man does not beat up his wife." Another group of women performed theater that raised the women's awareness about domestic violence. The leaders invited progressive leaders who raised women's consciousness on issues of rape and incest through storytelling. The women said that storytelling helped them to gain emotional and psychological stability and healing. They also stated that consciousness raising activities and methods developed their critical thinking skills. However, the women rejected the content of the theater about domestic violence because they felt that it was negatively stereotyping Zulu men.

Because the women learned these consciousness raising activities at a one-time annual workshop and not regularly in their respective groups, they felt that one-time events were not adequate to bring about transformation. Follow-up sessions were recommended for future program activities.

Eliminating Cultural Oppression

The views of women and leaders differed on the causes of cultural oppression. While the women were concerned about the contamination of the Zulu culture by western influences, the leaders

felt that the Zulu culture domesticated and oppressed the women. The leaders criticized the custom of *lobolo* or bride price, for disempowering the women. They also thought that the sexist Zulu culture devalued women and their work. On the contrary, the women thought that the Zulu traditions such as *umhlanga* and *ukuqomisa* were their pride that had to be preserved.

Empowerment. The women believed that preservation of the Zulu tradition was empowering. They reinforced their culture by singing traditional Zulu songs, by performing Zulu dance, and also by cultural concerts in which they paraded and showed off traditional Zulu attire. The women also revitalized the lost Zulu tradition of mentoring young women through their coming of age. The leaders, on the other hand, believed that modernizing the women was the best way of empowering them. Hence, the leaders taught the women about their rights. The women attested to attitude change as a result of the knowledge they had learned about their rights.

Although the women believed that knowing about their rights was empowering, the sexist attitudes of the society prohibited them from exercising their rights in their homes and in public. Another problem was that some women did not believe in the existence of women's rights.

Other Mediating and Mitigating Factors on Empowerment

Non-Participatory Participation. During the selection of one district committee, as participant observer I was designated a task of counting the ballots. When the woman whom the leaders had targeted for winning the deputy chair lost the vote, the leaders called me aside and ordered me to swop the names so that their favorite women would get the position. This incident showed the powerlessness of the women in the face of injustices and inequalities. The women's participation in the selection process was practically non-participatory. Also, the hierarchical top-down structure of the program limits the women's participation in curriculum and policy-making decisions. These powers are vested in the executive committee.

Collective Empowerment. The women believed in collective empowerment and emphasized that working as a team had generated solidarity and positive interrelationships among them. Their spirituality manifested itself in their song "*ngiboleke imbokodo ngigaye ubuvila bami*," which means "lend me a boulder so that I can grind my laziness." The women said this song invoked a communal spirit and fueled them to work harder. They also sang it in lieu or in preparation for a prayer. The women agreed that singing kept them going and bound them together as a community of women.

Lack of Knowledge as a Form of Bureaucracy. The findings revealed that the women only knew the acronym and not the full title of their organization. They also did not know the goals and mission statement of the program even though the constitution was available in both English and their vernacular. The interpretation of the acronym had no relation to the meaning of empowerment. However, all the members of the mother body knew everything concerning the program.

Conclusion

The grassroots women asserted that they were empowered because they had gained subsistence income that enabled them to maintain their families. They also acquired a sense of self-sufficiency which they said eliminated their dependency. By taking collective action against racial, gender, and class hegemony, the women felt empowered. Engaging in entrepreneurship and in skills that are traditionally appropriate to men developed a positive self-esteem and liberated the women from the domestic sphere. Discovering individual potentialities and mobilizing against violence on women was also fulfilling. Being able to protect their Zulu culture also empowered the women. The leaders perceived reversal of traditional roles between women and men as a determinant of empowerment.

However, the collision of the meaning of empowerment between the women and leaders raises concerns about the elusiveness of the definition of empowerment. What the women perceive as empowerment is sometimes seen by the leaders as disempowerment and vice versa. This collision of meaning shows lack of collaboration and the absence of negotiation of the meaning of empowerment by the women and leaders. This situation is not uncommon in Adult Education and Women's Studies programs where adult educators, in their attempt to 'empower' the learners, sometimes disempower them by criticizing cultural, religious, or ethnic values that are of utmost significance to the learners. To avoid ambiguities and contradictions in the definitions of empowerment, it is vital that program leaders and educators of adults and women take time to step back and let the learners define empowerment on their own.

Whether empowerment is working in the NAWE program is also not clear. The women perceive the program as a hiding place from the domesticating household chores. This means they still unquestioningly accept the domestic sphere as their rightful domain. They still accept the division of labor among women and men as normal, and not as a sphere that women have to share with men. It is also questionable whether empowerment can be defined in terms of acquisition of income without analyzing the interactions and interrelationships under which income is obtained. The bureaucratic, top-down structure of the program undermines the significance of democracy and the contemporary view of bottom-up approach to development.

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