

# Men's Perceptions of Women Empowerment: Evidence from the Ijesa of Osun State, Nigeria

ALONGE, Sunday Kolawole

Social Sector Group, Social and Governance Policy Research Department,  
Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research (NISER), P.M.B. 5, U.I. P.O. Ibadan.

[alongesk@yahoo.com](mailto:alongesk@yahoo.com)

## Abstract

Empowerment literally means to invest with power, in the context of women's empowerment the term has come to denote women's increased control over their own lives, bodies, and environments. In discussions of women's empowerment, emphasis is often placed on women's decision-making roles, their economic self-reliance, and their legal rights to equal treatment, inheritance, and protection against all forms of discrimination. Women's empowerment has been seen as the panacea for fertility reduction and a veritable force for female emancipation, reproductive rights, and achievement of female family size goals. It is therefore important that men have a good understanding of what it connotes, since this can have positive influence on the empowerment of women. This paper examined the perceptions of men of Ijesaland on what constitutes women's empowerment. In addition, the paper examined the understanding of Ijesa men about the types of women's empowerment and the factors that predisposes Ijesa women to being empowered. Data was collected from a cross section of men of Ijesa indigenes in Ijesaland using qualitative approach. In other words, In-depth interviews (IDIs) and Focus group discussions (FGDs) were used to collect data from ever married men in Ijesaland. The instruments used in data gathering are IDI and FGD guides. The findings revealed that Ijesa men demonstrated a fair understanding of what women's empowerment connotes and all the aspect of empowerment mentioned by the respondents is captured by the literature. The study concluded that the understanding of Ijesa men of what constitute women's empowerment is in line with what scholars who have conducted research opined women's empowerment to be.

**Keywords:** Decision Making, Ijesa, Men, Types of Empowerment, Women Empowerment

## 1. Background/Literature Review

Walters (1991) traced the source of the concept of women's empowerment to the interaction between feminism and the concept of "popular education" developed in Latin America in the 1970s. It is a challenge to basic power relations and a demand for redistributing power between genders. According to Batliwala (1994), empowerment is held to be panacea for social ills including high population growth rates, environmental degradation, and low status of women among others. She further examined the concept and developed some approaches which had been tested and found to have worked in South East Asia. These she analysed under the broad subheadings of integrated approach, economic empowerment, and consciousness, arising against the backdrop of the fact that to upgrade the condition of women is to enhance community advancement. The approach employs the use of a package of inventions to alleviate poverty, meet basic survival needs, reduce gender discrimination, and help women gain self-esteem. The economic empowerment approach organises women into collectives which work in a range of areas including training and skills development, new technologies or marketing as well as providing auxiliary supports as child care, health services, literacy programmes and legal education to bring up new consciousness, increase knowledge of self-worth, societal and gender analysis and improve access to skills and information. In this approach, groups themselves determine their priorities. Besides, women's knowledge of their own bodies and ability to control reproduction are also considered vital.

It is in the light of the above that Sen *et al.* (1994) assert that promotion of women's empowerment – in concept, language, and practice – can help bridge the distance between women's rights language increasingly used in policy statements, and the actual implementation of such policies. Although empowerment literally means -to invest with power, in the context of women's empowerment the term has come to denote women's increased control over their own lives, bodies, and environments. In discussions of women's empowerment, emphasis is often placed on women's decision-making roles, their economic self-reliance, and their legal rights to equal treatment, inheritance and protection against all forms of discrimination, in addition to the elimination of barriers to access such resources as education and information (Germaine and Kyte, 1995; United Nations, 1995).

Following from the above, Kishor and Lekha (2008) asserted that there are several cogent and pressing reasons for evaluating, promoting and monitoring the level of women's empowerment in a country, not the least of which is that household health and nutrition is generally in the hands of women. Hence, women's empowerment is necessary for ensuring their own welfare, as well as the well-being of their households. Empowerment of women is also critical for the development of a country, because it enhances both the quality and quantity of human resources available for development. Furthermore, the success of development efforts depends on the fruits of development reaching men *and* women, boys *and* girls (World Bank, 2001). The extent, to which this happens, however, depends critically on gender relations within the society that define the worth of one sex relative to that of the other. A final, but fundamental reason for promoting the empowerment of women is that failing to empower women to reach their full potential is a violation of their basic human rights (Kishor and Lekha, 2008). As important, because women's empowerment requires changes in male power and dominance, an empowerment approach would increase policy and programme attention to male responsibility for their own fertility, disease transmission and child care.

In order for women to be empowered, there is the need for women's autonomy. Dyson and Moore (1983) define equality of autonomy between men and women as "equal decision-making ability with regard to personal affairs". Safilios-Rothschild (1982) asserts that the gap between status and autonomy is evident in the fact that, although women may rise to higher status levels either as producers, reproducers of labour, as mother-in-law, or in other social roles, their subordination to men is not necessarily reduced.

Empowerment has been used to represent a wide range of concept and to describe a proliferation of outcomes. The term has been used to advocate for certain types of policies and intervention strategies than to analyse them, as demonstrated by a number of documents from the United Nations (UNDAW 2001; UNICEF 1999), the Association for Women and Development (Everett 1991), among others.

Bennett (2002) has developed a framework in which "empowerment" and "social inclusion" are closely related but separate concepts. Drawing on Narayan (2002), Bennett describes empowerment as "the enhancement of assets and capabilities of diverse individuals and groups to engage, influence and hold accountable the institutions which affect them. Bennett notes that this definition is intended to be operational, and describe processes rather than end point. The empowerment process, as she characterizes it, operates "from below" and involves agency, as exercise by individuals and groups. As Narayan (2002) argue, systemic change is necessary to sustain empowerment over time.

According to Malhotra *et al.* (2002), it is important to acknowledge that women's empowerment encompasses some unique elements. First, women are not just one group amongst several disempowered subjects of society (the poor, ethnic minorities etc.); they are a cross – cutting category of individuals that overlaps with all these other groups. Second, household and interfamilial relations are a central locus of women disempowerment in a way that is not true for other disadvantaged groups. This means that efforts at empowering women must be especially cognizant of the implications of broader policy action at the household level. Third, several of the authors reviewed in this work argue that women's empowerment requires systemic transformation in most institutions, but fundamentally in those supporting patriarchal structures (Kabeer 2001, Batliwala 1994).

Despite the diversity in the discussion on women's empowerment, there is a greater consensus in the literature on its conceptualization. There is a nexus of a few key overlapping terms that are most often included in defining empowerment; options, choice, control, and power. Most of these are referring to women's ability to make decisions and affect outcomes of importance to themselves and their families.

Given the diversity in the emphases and agendas in discussions on women's empowerment, greater consensus is found in the literature on its conceptualization than expected. Control over one's own life and over resources is often stressed. Thus, there is frequent reference to some variant of the ability to "affect one's own well-being", and "make strategic life choices". For example, Sen (1993) defines empowerment as "altering relations of power ... which constrain women's options and autonomy and adversely affect health and well-being". Batliwala's (1994) definition is in terms of "how much influence people have over external actions that matter to their welfare". At this point it is necessary to be explicit about what we mean by the term -empowerment. Several researchers have tried to capture the meaning of the word such as (Malhotra *et al.*, 2002); who asserted that the concept of empowerment is more generally applicable to those who are powerless, whether they are male or female, individuals or a group, or a class or caste. Hence nothing about the concept of empowerment per se applies to women alone. Nonetheless, women's empowerment, or lack of it, is unique in that it cuts across all types of class powerlessness and, unlike class powerlessness, is also played out within families and households. However, the definition most relevant to the approach taken in this thesis is -Empowerment is the process by

which the powerless gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives. It includes both controls over resources and over ideology... a growing intrinsic capability -greater self-confidence, and an inner transformation of one's consciousness that enables one to overcome external barriers... (Sen and Batliwala, 2000). Keller and Mbwewe (1991, as cited in Rowlands 1995) describe it as "a process whereby women become able to organize themselves to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination".

Also appearing frequently in definitions of empowerment is an element related to the concept of human agency – self-efficacy. Drawing mainly from the human rights and feminist perspectives, many definitions contain the idea that a fundamental shift in perceptions, or "inner transformation", is essential to the formulation of choices. That is, women should be able to define self-interest and choice, and consider themselves as not only able but also entitled to make choices (Chen 1992; Sen 1993; Rowlands 1995; Sen 1999; Nussbaum 2000; Kabeer 2001). Kabeer (2001) goes a step further and describes this process in terms of "thinking outside the system" and challenging the status quo.

Kabeer (2001) offers a useful definition of empowerment that effectively captures what is common to these definitions and that can be applied across the range of contexts that development assistance is concerned with: "The expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them". Kabeer's definition is especially attractive because it contains two elements which help distinguish empowerment from other closely related concepts: 1) the idea of process, or change from a condition of disempowerment, and 2) that of human agency and choice, which she qualifies by saying that empowerment implies "choices made from the vantage point of real alternatives" and without "punishing high costs".

Early studies of "women's status" often covered aspects of empowerment without explicitly labeling it as such. One of the earliest empirical studies in this area, for example, used the more general term "women's status" but located a nexus of gender-related power differentials in the household, noting how important the family unit is to understand the operation of gender in a society (Acharya and Bennett 1981). Acharya and Bennett also highlighted the links between women's economic roles and their control over resources and life options.

Similarly, "women's empowerment", "gender equality" and "gender equity" are separate but closely related concepts. The recent policy research report by the World Bank (2001a) employs the term "gender equality", which it defines in terms of equality under the law, equality of opportunity (including equality of rewards for work and equality in access to human capital and other productive resources that enable opportunity), and equality of voice (the ability to influence and contribute to the development process). Gender equality implies "equivalence in life outcomes for women and men, recognizing their diverse needs and interests, and requiring a redistribution of power and resources". Gender equity "recognizes that women and men have diverse needs, preferences, and interests and that equality of outcomes may necessitate different treatment of men and women" (Reeves and Baden, 2000).

Notwithstanding the similarities in the concepts underlying many of these terms, the concept of empowerment can be distinguished from others based on its unique definitional elements. As discussed above, the first essential element of empowerment is that it is a process (Chen 1992; Rowlands 1995; Oxaal and Baden 1997; Kabeer 2001). None of the other concepts explicitly encompasses a progression from one state (gender inequality) to another (gender equality). Much of the emphasis on empowerment as a process is found in the conceptual literature, but this understanding is also beginning to be incorporated into the frameworks of empirical studies. For example, even as Jejeebhoy (2000) considers autonomy and empowerment to be fairly similar, she argues that the former is a static state – and thus measurable by most available indicators – while the latter is change over time, and not so easily measurable.

The second element of empowerment that distinguishes it from other concepts is agency – in other words, women themselves must be significant actors in the process of change that is being described or measured (Sen 1993; Mehra 1997). Thus, hypothetically there could be an improvement in indicators of gender equality, but unless the intervening processes involved women as agents of that change rather than merely as its recipients, it would not be considered as empowerment. However desirable, it would merely be an improvement in outcomes from one point in time to another. The importance of agency in the discourse on empowerment emerges from "bottom up" rather than "top down" approaches toward development (Rowlands 1995; Oxaal and Baden 1997; Narayan *et al.* 2000a; 2000b). At the institutional and aggregate levels, it emphasizes the importance of participation and "social inclusion" (Friedmann 1992; Chambers 1997; Narayan *et al.* 2000a; 2000b). At the micro level, it is embedded in the idea of self-efficacy and the significance of the realization by individual women that they can be the agents of change in their own lives.

This paper examined the perception of men of Ijesaland on what constitutes women's empowerment. In addition, the paper examined the understanding of Ijesa men as regards the types of women's empowerment and the factors that predisposes Ijesa women to being empowered. This becomes necessary because men's understanding of the concept will affect their level of empowerment. Women's empowerment has been seen as the panacea for fertility reduction and a veritable force for female emancipation, reproductive rights, and achievement of female family size goals. Therefore, there is the need to explore the Ijesa men's understanding of the concept of women's empowerment.

Data was collected from a cross section of men of Ijesa indigenes in Ijesaland using qualitative approach. In other words, In-depth interviews (IDIs) and Focus group discussions (FGDs) were used to collect data from ever married men in Ijesaland. The instruments used in data gathering are IDI and FGD guides.

## 2. Perception of the Concept of Women's empowerment among men in Ijesaland

Although there are various definitions of women's empowerment as could be found in the literature, the views of the respondents as to what constitutes women's empowerment were sought during the course of the study. They defined and described women's empowerment in different ways according to their knowledge, experience and perception of the subject. Their definitions and descriptions range from improvement of women status, financial independence by women, participation in political sphere and ability to express themselves in the public among others.

Some of the respondents emphasized that authority is very important in empowering women. To them, giving women authority is an essential aspect of their empowerment:

*Women's empowerment simply means giving them some authority or power to carry out some assignment. (IDI, Male Pastor)*

*Women's empowerment is defined as a way of giving women authority to have free access to do things without any second thought. (IDI, Councilor)*

Elaborating further, some asserted that the issue of livelihood and well-being is central to the definition of women's empowerment:

*The concept of women's empowerment means primarily something for a particular woman that can sustain her, like job. When women are empowered is when they secure a means of livelihood, what she can rely on for survival; that is when a woman is truly empowered. (Councilor, Ilesa East LGA)*

*Add more to their power and living comfortably without depending on anybody that is what is known as women's empowerment. (IDI, Islamic Religious Leader)*

*Women's empowerment is all about what can raise the status of women generally and improve their livelihood and better their lots. Women's empowerment has to do with self-esteem and what they achieve educationally and politically. A woman is empowered when she can contribute her little for the development of the family, that is, realizing an income to cater for the family. Women are empowered when they are financially buoyant, when they can stand on their own, when they can stand and rub shoulders with their fellow men in the community. So, women are empowered even when they can also express their opinion and hold position in the society. (Male FGD, 41 years and above)*

An opinion expressed by a civil servant indicates the notion of equality in his definition of women's empowerment:

*My concept of women's empowerment is upgrading of women to be up to the status of men politically, educationally, socially, and all others; and it is when a woman is being brought up educationally. That is also empowerment. (IDI, Male Vice Principal)*

Some respondents gave a broader definition of women's empowerment by asserting that women should be allowed to occupy rightful position merited by them;

*Women's empowerment is putting women in their rightful position, deemed fit for them. And it is the ability for women to perform well in the position given to them and to be self-reliant without becoming a liability to their husbands. (Male FGD, 15-34 yrs)*

The issue of gainful employment and financial support for women to do their business was paramount in some respondents' definition of women's empowerment as could be seen below:

*To empower women is to help and assist them in business and trading and to allow them to contribute to the political circle. (Male FGD, 15-34 years uneducated)*

The above quotations show the respondents understanding of what women's empowerment is all about.

### **3. Knowledge of Types of Women's empowerment among men in Ijesaland**

Respondents were also asked about the type of women's empowerment in their conception, and in their opinion they talked about three types of empowerment: Political empowerment, social empowerment and economic empowerment. Some of them categorize their understanding of women's empowerment in these areas as follows:

*An Ijesa woman... normally comes out for politics. You will see them campaigning, dancing, jubilating, crying out to the people to vote for the candidate they want in power. Even if you are traveling may be from Osogbo to Ilesa you will see them discussing about politics inside the vehicle. That is why one of our women here, Erelu Obada is one of the women that is politically empowered. Ijesa women are economically empowered... have been trading and marketing. You need to go to "Sabo" on Mondays, on Tuesdays, even every fifteen days, see our women there very active. You see a lot of them engaging in kolanut business. They sell provisions just to make sure that they too contribute their own quota. They are socially empowered. You will see them on Saturday, attending one ceremony or the other; you see them trooping out (IDI, Male Principal)*

*We recorded that the last political dispensation in this State we had women as our deputy governor. Right now she is even a minister, Minister of State for Defense, Erelu Olusola Obada. If we look at the recently constituted state executive there is a lady there who is a bona fide Ijesa indigene and when we look around among interim administration at the Local Governments level in Ilesa West LGA where I belong, two women have been included in the list. So, I think politically as well they have been empowered. If women are not empowered socially who do you think will be empowered socially? Every weekend, as Friday to Saturday come and go, Ijesa women are socially in the fore front. You cannot do without them. You will be seeing them in different colours and attires and "gele". Socially, I believe they are empowered. (IDI, Male Pastor)*

Elaborating further, another respondent expressed his categorization of the types of empowerment as follows:

*I believe they are indeed empowered because politically some women came out during the last election to protest. In the other election, women were among those who canvassed for governorship. One of those who canvassed for Senator of Osun State is a woman though I may not know where she comes from. So that is the kind of political empowerment we are talking about. In Ijesaland, many of the businesses that are carried out in Ilesa here are through the women, Yinka Oba Foam is owned by a woman. There are some filling stations in Ijesaland that are owned by women. If you go to some of the places in town, there women are the ones mainly in business. Yes, they are deeply involved in social engagement. The little I know as a pastor, in most of the marriages, entertainer, they take charge of everything. Who will speak for the groom and the bride's*

*family? Women are the ones who take care of that. I have never seen a man do it (Alaga ijoko or Alaga iduro). (IDI, Male Pastor)*

A respondent alluded to the issue of affirmative action to explain political empowerment as it affects Ijesa women:

Many respondents interviewed alluded to the status of Ijesa women both in the olden days and nowadays as one of the factors that predisposes them to being empowered. The respondents interviewed asserted that Ijesa women are hard working. They also maintained that they are very good at business. Almost all the respondents interviewed were of the opinion that Ijesa women of the olden days engaged in a type of higher purchase trading with a method of recovering debt called *osomaalo*. This literally means that such a trader would bend down until the debtor who bought goods from her had paid the money he or she owed before she would stand up. The respondents interviewed also maintained that nowadays Ijesa women are educated and occupy good positions in government offices, and are also doing well in politics.

A few of the respondents emphasized the role played by a particular type of higher purchase trading with a method of debt recovering called *osomaalo* in the empowerment of olden days women in Ijesaland as follows:

*Our olden day's women were involved in businesses and trading. They move round the places for 'osomaalo'. They go everywhere so there is no city and town you cannot discover Ijesa women concerning trading and business matters. Nowadays, women in Ijesa land are competing and contesting with men politically. For example, our formal deputy governor is from Ilesa. So women nowadays are trying to emulate such a woman to get to such position like hers. Ijesa women nowadays are found in government parastatals, now you will see them in top positions and are fighting for Ijesaland. (Male FGD, 40 years and below, uneducated)*

In comparing what predisposes the olden days and nowadays women in Ijesaland to being empowered, a respondent expressed his opinion that education is now playing a pivotal role and this view was shared by others during the course of the interview:

*Nowadays we have women who are brought up educationally and they are now better than the olden day's women. Women of nowadays in Ijesaland are better than the olden day ones. I mention the names of "Bolanle Awe, Remi Olowu, Erelu Obada that vie for one post or the other which is not like that in the olden days. (IDI, Male Vice Principal. Similar views were expressed by the majorities of the FGD and IDI conducted)*

The above section of the paper illustrates the understanding of the Ijesas as regards the concept of women's empowerment and the types of empowerment among the Ijesa women. It also discusses factors that predispose Ijesa women to being empowered. The next section will look at what literature has to say with regard to the concept of women's empowerment, and the extent to which the understanding of Ijesa people are in tandem with literature.

#### 4. Conclusion

In analysing what literature described as women's empowerment, it could be said that Ijesa men demonstrated a fair understanding of what women's empowerment connotes and this understanding may have positively influence the extent to which Ijesa women are empowered as opined by the respondents. All the aspect of empowerment mentioned by the respondents is captured by the literature. Furthermore, the processes of empowerment as described in the literature were also alluded to by the respondents in their definitions and factors predisposing Ijesa women to being empowered.

Furthermore, related concepts of women's empowerment such as "gender equality", "gender equity", "women's status" can be decipher from the understanding of Ijesa men as far as the concept of women's empowerment is concerned. In a nutshell, the understanding of Ijesa men of what constitute women's empowerment is in line with what scholars who have conducted research opined women's empowerment to be.

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