

Empowerment through Employment: A Study among the Women Auto-Rickshaw Drivers

Jithu T V

Abstract: *Gender equality and the process of women empowerment is widely discussing in the academic arena today. Many projects and programs are now prevailing in our country focusing for the empowerment of women. Gender mainstreaming is the way to gender equality. Mainstreaming gender in the transport sector is an innovative idea put forward by the global agencies like World Bank, International Labor Organization, many conventions on women etc. and the national agencies like the central and state government. Auto-rickshaw is the part of public transport system in India. Women auto-rickshaw drivers in Ernakulam district in Kerala is the respondents of the present paper. Various dimensions of empowerment of women and how these dimensions are applicable to the respondents of the study are discussed in the paper.*

1. Introduction

Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 2030 gives much importance to 'Gender Equality and the empowerment of women and girls' and target to 'make cities human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable by 2030'. It targeted to provide safe, affordable, and sustainable transport system for all, improving the road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons (A/RES/70/1, 2015).

Typically gender is unnoticed in transport planning in spite of the recognition that 'women and men experience cities in different ways'. Women's interest and needs are different and have been underrepresented in urban as well as rural transport and development policies. This is due to the gender blind approach of Indian society towards the overall development of the country (Mahadevia, 2015). Public / private transport sector is one among other sectors have conventionally been regarded as 'no place for women'. It is the reality still today in many countries. But the involvement of women in the transport sector itself breaks the gender role assigned upon her by the patriarchal social concept. All individual countries and states have their own gender mainstreaming programmes especially in the transport sectors.

Gender in Transport Sector

The policies and programmes of international and national agencies and institutions such as World Bank, International Labor Organization, United Nations Development Programme, Beijing Platform for Action etc. works for achieving the 11th goal of Sustainable Development Policy. And it aims to the economic, social, cultural and political empowerment of women. The ILO Transport Policy 2013 stands as an instance. It is an initiative to increase women participation in transport sector by reducing the violence against them. The promotion of women's employment in transport sector is the major agenda of Asian Development Bank conference on gender in urban governance and transport held in Georgia in 2018 (Kurshitashvili, 2018).

Public transport system in India

Public transport system covers a large population in India and it includes local and metro train, bus, taxi, and auto-rickshaw. Besides the urban, regional and local trains, the

government introduced metro trains for fast commuting around the city. Buses serves as a cheap and convenient mode of transport cover almost 90% of public transport system and mostly it is run by the state government owned transport corporations. Taxi is the most available mode of public transport in Indian cities. It can be hired from the taxi stand. As per the government regulation on taxi fare, it should be scheduled with the distance of the destination. There is a provision for charging additional charges from the passenger for luggage, late night rides, toll taxes etc.

Auto-rickshaw is a mode of public transportation very common in Indian cities. It provides an efficient means ride to connect over short distance such as in cities or towns mainly for the working class, students, house wives, etc.

Barriers in front of Women in Employment

The following are some of the facts stand as barriers to achieve the gender equality in front of women as well as society. They are (1) the stereotypical roles assigned on women affected their education and career choices. So they generally select the small task jobs like cashier, teacher, nurse, farmer, etc. rather than the heavy task jobs like train driver, plumber, constructor, etc. (2) Another fact is that the prevalence of male dominated culture with explicit and implicit biases. This male dominated ideology makes the women work invisible and under-represented from the labor market. (3) Workplace health and safety issues including sexual harassment are another reasons stands as an obstacles in front of women come into transport sector. Regularly the society makes a common consciousness in the mind of women that women are become sexually exploited and harassed by the male in public space. This insists them to stay in home and work inside the home makes a security feeling in the mind of women. (4) The typical working hours in an industry cannot be afforded by the women who have the responsibility of household. Because the working women are double burden with the work inside home and work outside home. It makes some difficulties in the work-life balance in their life (Kurshitashvili, 2018).

Women auto-rickshaw drivers

The public transport system is generally owned and dominated by the male in society. But nowadays, women itself or with the help of national or international transport policies, women are largely come into the transport sector for seeking their livelihood. In Indian cities, on the matter of convenience most of the women prefer taxi, auto-rickshaw

for livelihood more instead of choosing other heavy vehicles.

Conventionally the auto-rickshaw driving is the male occupation in our society. But when female come into this field itself breaks the gendered stereotypical roles assigned on women in this society. It is a way of gender mainstreaming practices for achieving gender equality in transport sector. Because women work is invisible and low paid in most of the other sectors and are treated as a secondary category and subjected to exploitation in the labor market. In most of the sectors the workers, especially the women workers don't have the right to schedule their work. So women are double burdened with the paid work in outside and unpaid work inside the house.

But as a driver, especially the auto-rickshaw drivers enjoy more freedom and autonomy than the job in other sectors. Mobility, equal pay for equal work, convenient working hours, etc. are the advantage of driving job. If a woman come into this field, these characteristics itself make her independent and empower. Because freedom of mobility, the just wage according to the work, freedom to schedule the working hours, more space for social interaction, economic independence, etc. plays vital role to the empowerment of women.

2. Methodology

The present paper analyses the empowerment aspects of women auto-rickshaw drivers in Ernakulam District. The study area, Ernakulam is a district in Kerala. It is the highest revenue yielding district and popularly known as the commercial capital of Kerala. 50 samples were collected by the researcher through census method from the study area. The data were collected directly with the help of interview schedule. Besides open-ended yes or no questions, Scaling method also included in the interview schedule to analyses the empowerment dimensions of respondents. Descriptive research design has adopted by the researcher for the progress of the present study. The collected data were analyzed with the help of SPSS version 21.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of the paper is to discuss various dimensions of women empowerment and how it appropriate to the women auto-rickshaw drivers in their day to day life.

Women Empowerment

Empowerment as a concept was first introduced in the Third International Conference on Women at Nairobi in 1985. The concept empowerment means individuals acquiring the power to think and act freely, exercise choice, and fulfill their potential as full and equal members in society. Naila Kabeer defined "Empowerment 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 control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination" (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2001).

Empowerment is a multi dimensional process. The generally used dimensions of empowerment and its potential operation

in the household, community and broader arenas are covering economic, socio-cultural, familial/ interpersonal, political and psychological empowerment of women (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2001). The present paper tries to explain the dimensions of women empowerment on the basis of the experience of women auto-rickshaw drivers.

Economic Dimension of Empowerment

The economic empowerment of women is functioning differently in household, community and in a broader arena. In the household level the economic empowerment of women demonstrate that the 'women's control over income and she can relatively contribute to the family and access to and control of the family resources'. In the community level the economic empowerment of women is working as 'women's access to employment, ownership of assets and land, access to credit, involvement and representation in the local trade associations, and access to markets'. In a broader sense the economic empowerment of women is 'women's representation in high paying jobs, representation of women in macro-economic policies, representation of women state and federal budgets' (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2001).

The present study focused on the empowerment of women auto-rickshaw drivers. They drive auto-rickshaw as part of searching their livelihood, so they are the sources of income to their family. It makes them economically independent and has the capacity to support the family financially. In the household level they have accessibility to the household resources. In the community level, the occupation itself makes them to meet the need and expense of their family. All the respondents have the bank account and 76% of the respondents having the savings in social groups. This emphasized the accessibility to credit and financial resources. 92 percentage of respondents purchased auto-rickshaw by personal and 88% owned the auto-rickshaw by themselves. It evidences the ownership of assets or property by women. The auto-rickshaw is a public transport system and the involvement of women into this filed indirectly help the economy to enhance the infrastructure facilities. They are become part of the economic activity of the economy.

Equal payment provided to the men and women auto-rickshaw drivers only on the basis of the distance irrespective of the gender, class, and caste discrimination. It is the advantage of the driving job. 68% of the women auto-rickshaw drivers from Ernakulam district opined that pay-scale is the reason for choosing this job as the means of livelihood. 54% of the respondents can earn more than Rs. 800 per day from driving the auto-rickshaw.

Socio-Cultural Dimension of Empowerment

In the household level the socio-cultural empowerment of women is displayed as 'women's freedom of movement, lack of discrimination towards women, commitment to educating the women'. In the community level the socio-cultural empowerment of women stands for 'women's visibility in and access to social space, access to modern transportation, and participation in extra-familial groups and social networks'. In a wider area the socio-cultural empowerment of women is practicing through 'women's access to a broad range of educational options, and direct

involvement of women into the social processes' (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2001).

Mobility is the basic nature of driving. The women auto-rickshaw drivers enjoy the freedom of mobility as part of their job for seeking livelihood. 64% of the women auto-rickshaw drivers from Ernakulam district marked their response as mobility is the reason for selecting this job as livelihood. 48% of the respondents ride the vehicle in between 200-250 K.M and 12% of them ride more than 250 K.M per day.

The driving job gives them more social contacts and visibility in public space more than any other. They get the chance to engage with the male members who were generally occupied in the transport sector. 70% of women auto-rickshaw drivers were members in Auto-Rickshaw Drivers Association / Unions. Among them 50% can attend all the meetings of the unions in which having the membership. 64% were members in the social group 'Kudumbasree' and 60% can attend the meeting held on every week.

Familial / Interpersonal Dimension of Empowerment

Familial or interpersonal dimension of empowerment functioning in the household level as 'women participation in domestic decision making, control over sexual relations, ability to make child bearing decisions, control over spouse selection and marriage timing and freedom from domestic violence'. In the community level it is functioning as 'the shift in marriage and kinship system like later marriage, self-selection of spouses, reduction in the practice of dowry, acceptability of divorce, etc. indicating greater value and autonomy for women and local campaigns against domestic violence'. 'Political, legal, religious support for women's decision on marriage age, Options for marriage and divorce, etc.' are identifies as the familial or interpersonal dimension of empowerment of women in broader arena (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2001).

While applying on the familial / interpersonal dimensions of empowerment of women on the respondents of the present study, all the women auto-rickshaw drivers from Ernakulam district opined that they are earning members in the family and have the space and involved all the time in the decision making process of the family. 10% of the women auto-rickshaw drivers from Ernakulam district were unmarried and 18% were widows and 12% were separated. This marital status of the respondents reveals the fact that their means of livelihood offer a kind of social acceptance to stand and continue as they are now. They agreed that no familial or social pressure works upon them to change the marital status without their consent.

Political Dimension of Empowerment

The political dimension of women empowerment in the household level is that 'women should have knowledge of political system and means of access to it, domestic support for political engagement, and women exercise the right to vote'. In the community level it reveals the 'women's involvement or mobilization in the local political system / campaigns, support for specific candidates or legislation, and representation in local bodies of the government'. In a

broader sense the political empowerment of women stands as 'women's representation in regional and national bodies of the government, strength as a voting community, and representation of women's interest in effective lobbies and interest groups' (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2001).

The Auto-Rickshaw Workers Unions or Auto-Rickshaw Drivers Association works based on the political ideology of the members clubbed in such unions or association. 70% of the women auto-drivers in Ernakulam district were the members in Auto-Rickshaw Drivers Association / Unions. They were included in the Center of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) of Communist Party of India Marxist; All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) of Communist Party of India, Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) of Indian National Congress and Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. 46% of the total respondents had membership in various political parties in their area. Some of them are sharing the leadership position in their parties. Through the nature of their employment, they achieved the consent of their family to freely engage the activities of their concerned political parties including the campaigns, activities for the welfare of the public, and some of them are contest in election also.

Psychological Dimension of Empowerment

In the household level the psychological empowerment of women reflected in their 'self-esteem, self-efficacy, and psychological well-being'. In the community level it is reflected in the name of 'women's potential of mobilization and collective awareness of injustice'. In a broader sense the psychological dimension of women empowerment stands for 'women's sense of inclusion and entitlement and the systematic acceptance of women's entitlements and inclusion' (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2001).

The psychological dimension of empowerment of women auto-rickshaw drivers were analyzed the present paper. The economic independency, mobility nature of their employment, the freedom to schedule the working hours based on their convenience, equal pay for equal work, more social contacts than any other employment generally engaged by the women, etc. offers a kind of social acceptance to the women auto-rickshaw drivers. This social acceptance paved the way for self-esteem and mental well-being. Through this job, they get the chance to directly involve the male occupied arena of transport sector and as part of the public transport system, the women auto-rickshaw drivers serves the public.

3. Conclusion

Women work is invisible and under-represented in the labor market. Women are less paid than the male in most of the sectors in labor market. But in transport sector, especially in driving vehicle, the women get payment as equal as men. The payment is determined by none other than the distance and duration of the ride to the destination. Generally driving auto-rickshaw as the means of livelihood is the male job. When women come into this field by overcome all the restrictions and barriers in front of them itself breaks the gendered stereotypical roles assigned upon them by the patriarchal ideology prevailing in our society. This job offers

mobility and more social space to interact with the society. It is a way of gender mainstreaming and thereby they achieve more or less gender equality. It works as a stimulant in the process of empowerment.

4. Statement of the Problem

Being employed and become empower is inter-dependent in the case of women auto rickshaw drivers. Gender mainstreaming by breaking the gender stereotypical role is the base of the women empowerment. The present study tries to depict how the employment contributes to the empowerment of women auto rickshaw drivers in Kerala. Through this study, the researcher aimed to study the socio-economic profile of the respondents. Their family and social relationships, economic details, occupational profile including the motivational factors for the selection of this job, details regarding working hours in a day, income and expenditure, maintenance of auto-rickshaw are included in the socio-economic profile of the respondents.

The researcher also tried to identify the challenges faced by the women auto-rickshaw drivers through this study. Challenges in maintaining health, domestic sphere and workplace are under consideration in this section. Through the consideration of male colleagues, passengers and traffic authorities, the researcher aims to study the issues faced by the respondents in their workplace. The problem solving strategies and the empowerment dimensions of women auto-rickshaw drivers is also analyzed by the completion of this study. The researcher suggests suitable measures to improve the working atmosphere of the women auto-rickshaw drivers in Kerala at the end of this study.

References

- [1] A/RES/70/1. (2015). *Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. New York: United Nations.
- [2] Kurshitashvili, N. (2018). Promoting Women's Employment in Transport Sector. *ADB Conference: Gender in Urban Governance and Transport*. World Bank Group.
- [3] Mahadevia, D. (2015). *Gender Sensitive Transport Planning for Cities in India*. New Delhi: Promoting Low Carbon Transport in India.
- [4] Malhotra, A., Schuler, S. R., & Boender, C. (2001). *Measuring Women's Empowerment as a Variable in International Development*. Gender and Development Group of the World Bank.
- [5] Vaghese, M. (2012, may 03). Shodhganga@INFLIBNET. *Women Empowerment through Kudumbasree: A Study in Ernakulam District*. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/25984>.