



WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN LADAKH: INSIGHTS FROM WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT: This paper is an attempt to understand empowerment through the lens of women's organisations and how they serve as crucial platforms for women to unite, advocate for their rights, and address social issues such as environmental conservation and traditional knowledge preservation. Through initiatives like skill development in handicrafts and advocacy against harmful practices like dowry, these organizations have empowered women to assert their agency and contribute meaningfully to their communities. This study explores the empowerment of women in Ladakh through the activities and impacts of two prominent women's organizations: the Women Alliance of Ladakh (WAL) and the Women's Wing of the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA).

Keywords: Gender equality, Ladakh, Ladakhi women, Women's empowerment.

INTRODUCTION:

Empowerment is a multifaceted concept that suggests the initiation of actions aimed at creating significant changes, particularly within a social context. This change is often understood as a process that leads to social transformation, involving shifts in power dynamics and improved access to resources, opportunities, and rights for individuals or groups. The meaning of empowerment can vary widely depending on the specific conditions and situations in which it is applied. It can relate to economic empowerment, where individuals gain financial independence; political empowerment, where marginalized groups gain a voice in political processes; or social empowerment, where communities develop the capacity to improve their social status and well-being.

Different scholars have offered various interpretations of empowerment based on their perspectives and areas of expertise. Srilatha Batliwala, a prominent researcher and activist, describes empowerment as a transformative process that fundamentally challenges and changes existing power relations. According to Batliwala, empowerment involves not only gaining access to resources and opportunities but also actively questioning and altering the structures and systems that maintain unequal power dynamics. Overall, empowerment is a dynamic and context-specific concept that encompasses a range of actions and outcomes, all directed toward achieving greater equity and justice in various spheres of life. Naila Kabeer highlights the importance of collective action, emphasizing that empowerment involves working with others to gain control over resources, set agendas, and make decisions. This perspective underscores the significance of collaboration and shared power, suggesting that empowerment is not just an individual endeavour but a collective one.

Power is a dynamic concept, constantly changing and closely tied to the control over the discourse of knowledge. It involves the ability to influence what is considered true or important, shaping perceptions and realities in society. Together, these perspectives illustrate the diverse dimensions of empowerment. In essence, empowerment is a complex, fluid process that involves both individual and collective actions aimed at challenging and changing existing power structures. It encompasses gaining control over resources, participating in decision-making, and developing the internal strength to influence one's life and society. This multifaceted approach underscores the importance of both personal agency and collective action in achieving meaningful social transformation.

METHODOLOGY:

This is a small part of my M.Phil. work, where I have focused on two women's organization namely: Women Alliance of Ladakh (WAL) and Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA). Women Alliance of Ladakh (WAL) which deals with the economic upliftment of Ladakhi women, and the women's wing of the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) that focuses on the social representation of Ladakhi women to understand the condition of women and the changes affecting women's lives in Ladakh.

Existing literature on Ladakh focuses on history, culture, and tourism. There is very little information or literature on Ladakhi women. My research is, therefore, an exploratory study. It employs a qualitative methodology comprising in-depth interviews with Ladakhi women from these two women's organization.

The qualitative method is useful in capturing factors such as women's perception, experiences, and beliefs that play an important role in women's daily lived experience, social condition, and position in society.

I chose these two organizations because both the organizations are old and well established and have witnessed changes over the period. I feel this shall help me as a researcher to get a better idea about the changes over time that have influenced women's views, lives, and condition.

WOMEN IN WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS

Women's Alliance of Ladakh (WAL) was founded by Helena Norberg Hodge and its first president was Sonam Dolma. The objective of the organization was to empower local women and communities to preserve tradition and promote Ladakhi culture. It has over 5000 members covering the region of Leh, Nubra, Sham, Changthang, and Zaskar. Making a network with the rural parts of Ladakh. The objectives of this organization are to maintain respect for the ethical and spiritual values of its culture, it highlights the importance of an agriculture for the Ladakhi economy and acknowledgement of local knowledge, craft, and practical skill. This organisation organises campaign and do document screening on Ladakh: for instance, documentation on Ancient Future learning from Ladakh, where they show the changing nature of the region, making people understand the importance of the sustainability and preservation. They have opened a handicraft shop which was set up in 2001, a local cafe which provides traditional cuisine, summer exhibition of traditional local knowledge and skills, medical camps and, they do village meetings on various issues.

Women's Alliance of Ladakh deals with the economic aspect of the women empowerment. In 1998 they had done the banning on the use of plastic bags further they also worked on protection of local crops and seeds in partnership with Navdanya. They have taught rural women handicraft skills of tailoring, knitting, natural dyeing thus enabling them to become financially independent. Women of Women's Alliance sometimes give a helping hand in the work of Ladakh Buddhist Association as a volunteer, especially on the visit of H.H. Dalai Lama. One of the important campaigns involving women from the Women of Women's Alliance of Ladakh was an Anti-Dowry mobilisation with the help of village head/Goba.

The Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) is considered older than the Women's Alliance of Ladakh. LBA consists of the Youth Wing and the Women's Wing. All are meant to address local issues.¹ The first president of women wing of LBA was Abi Yangchen Tsangs-pa. there are more than 88 villages under the Women's Wing of Ladakh Buddhist Association with five to six executive members from each village. There objectives of this organisation are to maintain the peace and prosperity of the place irrespective of class and caste, they deal with the private and personal matter of women as well. Women Wing of Ladakh Buddhist Association have also work on environment and social dispute.

“I served as the president of the Women Alliance of Ladakh, an organization founded in 1991. The idea came from Helena, who suggested creating a women's group to preserve Ladakh's traditions and culture. Helena encouraged women knowledgeable in local food production and culture to join, without requiring any formal education. We decided to give it a try for a year as volunteers, driven by our keen interest.

We worked near the ecology office, often in the summer under the shade of a tree, making traditional foods like Tagi (bread), Sku, and Chutaki. Helena surveyed our efforts and encouraged us to continue, prompting us to establish a women's

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ladakh_Buddhist_Association

organization spanning from Skara to Gangles. Ten of us came together to form the group, aiming to raise awareness about the importance of traditional food production. We traveled from village to village to spread this message.” (Sonam Dolma, 2017).

The creation of a women's organization in Ladakh stands as a remarkable milestone for the local women. This initiative has empowered them by fostering a deeper appreciation of their cultural heritage and equipping them with a broad range of skills and knowledge. The organization, including entities like the Women's Wing of the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA), has provided an invaluable platform for women to engage in meaningful work and address their social concerns.

These organizations have become safe havens where women can openly discuss their personal and private grievances, assured of confidentiality. This support system has been crucial in giving women a voice and a sense of community, allowing them to share their experiences and challenges without fear of judgment or repercussions.

Respondents have highlighted the persistent gender biases within the society, where historically, men have dominated crucial decision-making processes. Women were often perceived as indecisive and irrational, especially regarding decisions affecting their lives. However, the formation of women's organizations has initiated a transformative shift in these perceptions.

The active participation of women in these organizations has challenged long-standing stereotypes, demonstrating their capability and rationality in decision-making. As a result, women's opinions are now valued, and they are increasingly being invited to participate in community meetings. This inclusion marks a significant step toward gender equality, recognizing women as vital contributors to the community's development and decision-making processes.

Overall, the establishment of women's organizations in Ladakh has not only advanced the status of women within the community but has also paved the way for a more inclusive and equitable society. This progress underscores the importance of collective action and the power of community-driven initiatives in driving social change.

WOMEN AND CHANGE: EMPOWERMENT, AGENCY, AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Change is eternal, and we cannot completely overlook the positive change that came to the place after the road connection like education, modern medical science and many more. Earlier Women used to do all the things by themselves, for instance: in the case of Eshey and Yangzom, where these two women have not only helped in their household work but even during pregnancy, they were their own doctors. Even education and knowledge were spread through parents to the younger generation. Here seeing two women recalling their memory made me realise the effect of modernity and because of these modernisations many things have been sorted out easily, which at that time seems to be impossible. She said that there was nothing as compared to present time

Sonam Yangzom (80) recalled, "During our time, there were no doctors. There was an old lady named Abi Chamdol whom people sometimes visited, but I never saw her."

Eshey Tsewang (84) shared, "All my deliveries were natural, and all seven of my children were born at home."

Yangzom (80), speaking to me but sharing with Eshey, recounted, "I was taught by Salipey Abi that if a boy is born, four nodes should be tied on each side of the navel, connecting the mother and child with care to avoid disfiguring his penis. For a girl, three nodes should be tied. This was told to me by Abi Lobzang."

Some respondents mentioned that previously their opinions were disregarded, with a belief prevailing that women were indecisive and irrational. However, following the establishment of women's organizations, women are now regarded as equally important in decision-making processes and are actively invited to participate in community meetings.

When the Women's Alliance was initiated, it initially focused on food production. With the support of volunteers and funds from private sponsors, it expanded its activities. This included organizing workshops where women not only

learned about organic cultivation but also shared skills such as stitching and coloring clothes. Over time, the organization also took on initiatives related to environmental protection.

These activities are structured into different projects, with responsibilities evenly distributed among the women within the organization. This approach ensures that each member contributes effectively to the organization's various endeavors.

Through the organization, women have been exposed to a wealth of new knowledge, including the importance of medical practices such as women's and child health, as well as women's education. The organization has actively promoted women's advancement through programs like Chidel Yontan (education for elders), stitching workshops, greenhouse farming initiatives, and advocacy for environmental causes such as banning alcohol.

Their work in preserving local organic farming has deepened their understanding of the detrimental effects of fertilizers. Women who once hesitated to speak up, even among members from different villages, now confidently share responsibilities, ideas, and knowledge with their peers. This transformation has not only empowered women with practical knowledge but has also fostered a strong sense of self-awareness and worth. Consequently, women have grown more confident and proactive in their contributions to the organization and their communities. Empowering women means helping women taking charge of their own lives. This understanding of empowerment is relevant in the context of Ladakh's traditional society. As Rahman(2013) definition points out:

Self-esteem and feeling of being as active agents are the fundamental principles of empowerment and she expands her thoughts by saying that empowerment should be considered aspect of perceiving oneself as an active agent capable of making decision (cited in Kabeer,1994).

Empowerment is a concept that varies in definition and significance depending on the individual. As noted by an NGO activist quoted in Batliwala (1993:48), "I appreciate the term empowerment because its lack of a precise definition allows us the opportunity to explore its practical implications before committing to a specific interpretation" (Kabeer, 1999, p. 436).

The activist's perspective resonates with my own observations during field research, where respondents struggled to articulate a clear definition of women's empowerment because the concept had not been widely discussed. However, they did grasp its meaning in relation to evolving societal norms over time. When questioned about empowerment, women frequently responded that it did not exist previously. They believed women lacked empowerment because they were typically denied the right to speak or participate in public affairs. Subsequent interviews with respondents illustrated how the understanding of empowerment has evolved with changing times and societal attitudes

Dolma Tsering (66): "How were women treated in the past? Were they empowered? D. Tsering: In the early days, women lacked empowerment. For instance, if a meeting was held and a male member could not attend, a woman couldn't take his place because women were viewed as irrational and their decisions were considered worthless. However, a positive change occurred after women's organizations were formed. Now, women are invited to community meetings and their opinions are valued.

What if there was no male member present? Was she still not allowed? D. Tsering: No, she was not allowed. In Leh city, women could attend as spectators, but their ideas were not taken seriously. In villages, women were not allowed to attend at all. But things have changed; now women are actively involved and offer suggestions, which makes me proud. Women from women's organizations are even invited to participate in major events."

Dolma Tsering views women's empowerment as the transformation she witnessed, where women who were previously excluded from community meetings are now regarded as equal participants. Women's ideas and perspectives are now valued and considered important.

Kabeer's definition of women's empowerment centers around the transformative process where women achieve greater control over their lives and gain the capacity to make strategic decisions. This empowerment hinges on

enabling women to access education, economic opportunities, and participation in decision-making processes. These components are seen as essential for enhancing women's agency and autonomy.

Women's organizations play a pivotal role in this empowerment journey. They serve not only as platforms for women to come together but also as catalysts for awareness and action on pressing issues. For instance, they advocate for women's education, which is foundational for empowering women with knowledge and skills. Economic opportunities provided through these organizations enable women to attain financial independence, further bolstering their autonomy.

Moreover, these organizations advocate for women's participation in decision-making processes at various levels of society and governance. By amplifying women's voices in these arenas, they strive to ensure that women's perspectives are included in policies and practices that affect their lives.

Beyond individual empowerment, these organizations contribute to broader societal changes. They address social concerns such as domestic violence, harmful practices like the dowry system, and societal norms like alcohol consumption. By addressing these issues, they aim to create a more equitable and sustainable society where women can thrive.

In essence, women's organizations not only empower individual women but also contribute to societal transformation by challenging inequalities and advocating for systemic changes that benefit women and future generations. Through their efforts, they create spaces where women can assert their worth, contribute meaningfully to society, and advocate for a more just and inclusive world.

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