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Images and agency: Path to women's empowerment

■ Kiran Chauhan **and** Anjali Capila

Department of Communication and Extension, Lady Irwin College, Delhi University, DELHI, INDIA

(Email: kchauhan.4feb@gmail.com)

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ABSTRACT

Images and agency as a path to women's empowerment is explored as a theoretical concept. Basic human rights are suggested as indicators of empowerment. The family as an agency uses positive images from mythology, literature, TV, Cinema to build confidence and self image of girl child. This empowered woman acts as a role model and an agency for the future woman which grows into a self perpetuating spiral.

INTRODUCTION

Energy in its pure physical form is required for all the processes of life. From the beginning of life a creature needs energy for power to breathe and move, and to perform as a separate entity from its parent. The first time a child says 'I, me, or myself' to empower herself she needs encouragement and support - Support of her family to negotiate new paths so that she does not fall – she needs agency. The family is the child's first agent that expands to become the society, the country, and the world.

Celebrity culture is based on the validation of a fan club. Without such validation as a positive or a negative image (Or Icon) there are no heroes or villains. A hero is the image of the aspirations of fans as they imagine them. An image is the vision of appearance and attributes that describe positive characters. These can be picked from real person, modified with additions or deletion, or be completely imaginary. Stories of humankind have differentiated good from evil, these concepts change with time, yet find images in mythology. Over a period of time fresh stories generate myths which may modify an old myth or give a new interpretations or value to it. Fight between 'Good' and 'Evil' are universal human images wherein the good always wins in the end.The values that a society assigns to freedom of thought, speech and actions are the core of a civilized society. In older civilizations the physical prowess of a man in comparison to a woman accorded him certain roles of power and most societies evolved as patriarchal or matrilineal where the major control of resources was male dominant. Technology and contraceptives placed women in a better position to negotiate power resulting in an upheaval in the power balance between sexes. A definition of human rights by the United Nations placed a bottom line on the rights of women in the gender power structure. This article examines the defines of women's empowerment within the structure of human rights. It further explores how agency influences images in a reciprocal manner, in an Indian context.

The objectives of the present study are to:

- Study the definitions of empowerment of women.
- Examine the relationship between agency and the images generated by it.
- Comprehend role of these images as agents for empowering women.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This is a review article. Research publications from books,

journals and internet were examined and a theoretical linkage has been suggested.

OBSERVATIONS AND ANALYSIS

The results obtained from the present investigation as well as relevant discussion have been summarized under following heads :

Empowerment of women : definitions :

Empowering women is a frequently cited goal of development interventions, if people have to be empowered then it means that they are currently disempowered. Different people use empowerment to mean different things. Empowering the poor and women has been identified as a development goal. It is generally accepted that as a group women are disempowered relative to men. Empowerment cannot be bestowed by a third party, it has to be claimed. Definitions of empowerment include a sense of people making decisions on matters that are important in their lives and being able to carry them out. Reflection, analysis and action are involved in this process which may happen at an individual or a collective level. Therefore empowerment is an ongoing process rather than a product. There is no final goal. The many definitions / concepts of empowerment are reviewed in Table 1.

Kabeer's (1999, 2000, 2001) definition contains two elements which help distinguish women's empowerment from other closely related concepts:

The idea of a process *i.e.* ongoing process or change from disempowerment.

Agency or choice which implies choices made from vantage point of real alternatives without punishingly high cost. It comes closest to what most writers are referring to. It encompasses the ability to formulate strategic choices, to control resources and decisions that affect important life's outcomes.

Some characterizations include what kabeer refers to as achievement/outcomes and what longwe (1994) refers to as welfare in an international policy process, women's empowerment is implicitly equated with political participation, legal reform and economic security. It is argued that achievements are in fact outcomes of empowerment.

Although agency requires women's participation, government and multilateral policies have enough justification to promote policies that strengthen gender equality through various means including legal and political reform and intervention to give women greater access to resources (World Bank, 2001).

The literature contains a range of terms, concepts and data that may be relevant for assessing empowerment, for example, various studies have aimed at measuring women's autonomy (e.g. Dyson and Moore, 1983; Basu and Basu, 1991; Jeejebhoy and Sathar, 2001), agency, status (e.g. Gage, 1995; Tzannatos, 1999), women's land rights (e.g. Quisumbing *et al.*, 1999), domestic economic power (e.g. Mason, 1998), bargaining power (e.g. Beegle *et al.*, 1998; Hoddinott and Haddad, 1995; Quisumbing and de la Briere, 2000) power (e.g. Agarwal, 1997; Beegle *et al.*, 1998; Pulerwitz *et al.*, 2000), patriarchy (e.g. Malhotra *et al.*, 1995), gender equality (World Bank 2001a and 2000b), or gender discrimination. Often there is no clear demarcation between these terms. Mason (1998) and Mason and Smith (2000), for example, treat empowerment, autonomy and gender stratification interchangeably. Similarly, Jejeebhoy (2000) considers autonomy and empowerment as more or less equal terms, and defines both in terms of women gaining control of their own lives *vis-a-vis* family, community, society, markets. In contrast, other authors have explicitly argued that autonomy is not equivalent to empowerment, stressing that autonomy implies independence whereas empowerment may well be achieved through interdependence (Malhotra and Mather, 1997; Govindasamy and Malhotra, 1996; Kabeer, 1998).

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 understanding the operation of gender in a society (Acharya and Bennett, 1981). Acharya and Bennett also highlight 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 different needs and interests, and requiring a redistribution of power and resources. Gender equity recognizes that women and men have different needs, preferences, and interests and that equality of outcomes may necessitate different treatment of men and women (Reeves and Baden, 2000:10).

Measuring empowerment :

Measures of empowerment must be outside localized gender systems and recognize universal elements of gender sub-ordination (Sen and Gawn, 1987; Bisnoth and Elson, 1999 Nussbaums, 2000). When women internalize their subordinate status and view themselves of lesser value their own sense of rights and entitlements is diminished. They may acquiesce to violence against themselves and make choices that reinforce

Table 1 : Definitions and concepts of empowerment

Sr. No.	Definition	Reference
1.	– Empowerment is defined as a person's capacity to make effective choices; that is, as the capacity to transform choices into desired actions and outcomes. – The extent or degree to which a person is empowered is Influenced by personal agency (the capacity to make purposive choice) and opportunity structure (the institutional context in which choice is made). – Asset endowments are used as indicators of agency. These assets may be psychological, informational, organizational, material, social, financial, or human. Opportunity structure is measured by the presence and operation of formal and informal institutions, including the laws, regulatory frameworks, and norms governing behaviour. Degrees of empowerment are measured by the existence of choice, the use of choice, and the achievement of choice.	Alsop Ruth and Heinsohn Nina (2005) Measuring Empowerment in Practice: Structuring Analysis and Framing Indicators World Bank Policy Research Working paper 3510
2.	Control over resources and ideology	Batliwala, Srilatha. 1994. "The meaning of women's empowerment: New concepts from action." Pp. 127-138 in Population Policies Reconsidered: Health, Empowerment and Rights. G. Sen, A. Germain and L.C. Chen, eds. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
3.	Economic empowerment having access to control over means to make a living on a sustainable and long term basis, receiving the material benefits of this access and its control.	Carr M. 2000. Women's economic empowerment: key to development. In Women's Empowerment and Economic Justice: Reflecting on Experience in Latin America and the Caribbean, De Pauli L (ed.). UNIFEM: New York.
4.	– Resources – Perceptions – Relationships – Power	Chen, Marty. 1992. Conceptual Model for Women's Empowerment. Unpublished.
5.	Power should be exercised. This refers to individual contest resistance to fixed roles/identities.	Foucault M. 1980. The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol. 1 . Penguin: Harlow.
6.	– Power within– self esteem, self confidence, e.g. internalization of lower status. – Power to is Power- Expansion of boundaries e.g. learning to read. – Power with- Power with refers to collective action	Hayward CR. 1998. 'De-facing power'. Polity 31: 22–34.
7.	Autonomy and empowerment are not similar autonomy is static. Empowerment is a process. Autonomy is independent but empowerment can be achieved by interdependence.	Jejeebhoy, Shireen J. and Zeba A. Sathar. 2001. "Women's autonomy in India and Pakistan: The influence of religion and region." Population and Development Review 27(4):687-712.
8.	– Resources include material, human and social including future claims. – Agency define goals and act on them (Power within) – Achievement or outcomes includes Roles, Norms and Outcomes of struggles. – Evolvement The idea of process or change from the condition of disempowerment and that of human agency and choices made from vantage point of real alternatives without punishing costs.	Kabeer N. 1999. 'Resources, agency, achievements: reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment'. Development and Change 30: 435–464. Kabeer N. 2000. The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market Decisions in London and Dhaka. Verso: London. Kabeer, Naila. 2001. "Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment." In Discussing Women's Empowerment-Theory and Practice. Sida Studies No. 3. Novum Grafiska AB: Stockholm.
9.	Empowerment is a process by which women redefine gender roles in ways which extends their possibilities for being and doing. – Emphasis on gendered nature of women's empowerment. – Extending limits of possible rather than choice.	Mosedale S 2005. Assesing Women's Empowerment: Towards A Conceptual Framework,

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10.	– Sense of self worth – Determine choices – Access to opportunities and resources. – Power to control their own lives – Influence direction of social change. To create a mere just social and economic order, rationally internationally.	Popin 2011 United Nations Population Information Network UN Population Division Department of Economic and Social Affairs with support from the UN Population Fund (UNFPA)
11.	Three dimension – Personal: Self confidence Self esteem Sense of agency – Close relationship – Collective	Rowlands J. 1997. Questioning Empowerment: Working with Women in Honduras. Oxfam: Oxford.
12.	Agency- women themselves must be significant actors. There could be improvement of indicators but unless the process involves women as agents of change rather then recipients it cannot be considered empowerment.	Sen, Gita. 1993. Women's empowerment and human rights: The challenge to policy. Paper presented at the Population Summit of the World's Scientific Academies.
13.	– Political participation – Decision making, Power over and Economic Resources.	UNDP 1995 *http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTEMPOWERMENT/Resources/486312-1095094954594/draft2.pdf*
14.	– Access to resources – Welfare – Awareness raising – Control	United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). 1994. The Women's Equality and Empowerment Framework. Available on-line at *www.unicef.org/programme/gpp/policy/empower.html.*
15.	– Access – Awareness Causes of inequality capacity to direct one's interest, taking control and action to overcome obstacles to reduce structural inequality.	UNICEF 2001 *http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTEMPOWERMENT/Resources/486312-1095094954594/draft2.pdf*
16.	– Rights – Resources – Voice	World Bank. 2001a. Engendering Development: Through Gender Equality in Rights, Resources, and Voice. World Bank Policy Research Report. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
17.	Empowerment is expansion of assets and capabilities of people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives. – Assests- material physical + financial include – level, livestock, Jewellery, Savings to withstand shocks and expand their horizons choices. – Capabilities – human capabilities include health, education and production of other life enhancing skills. ? Social capabilities: belongings, leadership reflections of trust, identity value that give meaning to life and capacity to organize. Political, capacity to represent other, access information, form association and participate in the political life of the community or country. – Capabilities enable people to use their assets – good health education. Both assets + capabilities can be individual or collective. Collective gives leverage.	*http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTEMPOWERMENT/Resources/486312-1095094954594/draft2.pdf*
18.	Conflict – Power over A-O-B – Present people or issues from getting to decision making – Such a conflict should not arise.	*http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTEMPOWERMENT/Resources/486312-1095094954594/draft2.pdf*

Table 2 : Women empowerment qualities according to human rights

Sr. No.	Women empowerment criteria	Human rights	Comments
Economic			
1.	Economic independence: • Self earned • Inherited property	Constitution Part IV Article 39 states that state shall, in particular, directs its policy towards securing: a. That the citizens, men and women equally have the right to an adequate means of livelihood; b. That there is equal pay for equal work for both men and women: c. That the health and strength of workers, men and women, and the tender age of children are not abused and that citizens are not forced by economic necessity to enter avocations unsuited to their age or strength.	
Social			
1.	Public expression include: • Mobility • Social validation • Collective efforts	❖ Right to Constitutional Remedies: If any fundamental rights are violated, everyone can approach the court to fight for the protection of his or her rights.	
2.	Accept her sexuality: • Expresses her self • Can take a lead	❖ Right to equality: we are all equal, according to the law, so laws are same for everyone. All citizens are guaranteed the rights to equality. No citizens can be discriminated against on the basis of religion, caste, sex or place of birth. ❖ Right to vote and participate: - Everybody, including children and young people, has the right to freely think and believe what they like as long as it does not harm anyone else. Every child and young person has the right to express his or her views. - Everyone has the right to meet friends and form groups to express ideas, so long as it does not break the law. We have the right to publicly demand what we are entitled to.	
3.	Education: • Good moral values • Responsible citizen	❖ Cultural and Educational Rights: Right of any section of citizens to conserve their culture, language or script, and right of minorities to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. ❖ Right to Education: children upto the age of 14 get education. It can also be free of cost.	
4.	Language: • Uses correct language • Not uses aggressive/ abusive language Roles in society • Mother • Sister • Daughter	❖ Right to Freedom: we can express our selves without fear as long as we do not hurt anyone. This includes the right to have gatherings in public places, to express our views, to form groups and organizations, and to move and reside and settle in any region.	
5.	Mothers role (custodian of humankind's future): • No gender bias in her upbringing of her children. • No feticide, Infanticide	❖ Right to equality: we are all equal, according to the law, so laws are same for everyone. All citizens are guaranteed the rights to equality. No citizens can be discriminated against on the basis of religion, caste, sex or place of birth.	

Contd……. Table 2

Contd……Table 2

Individual		
1.	Identity/ individuality: Perspective of Life • Own point of view • Respects and is open to others points.	❖ Right to Life: everyone has the right to live, grow up and have a healthy life.
2.	Self Respect: • Respect herself / confident • Respects others	❖ Right to equality: we are all equal, according to the law, so laws are same for everyone. All citizens are guaranteed the rights to equality. No citizens can be discriminated against on the basis of religion, caste, sex or place of birth.
3.	Emotional Balance: • Guilt free • Defends weak people • Respects strong people • Can express emotions and sexuality	❖ Right to freedom from exploitation and abuse: No one, including people who care for children, should physically, sexually or mentally hurt someone else. The government should make sure that everyone is protected from abuse and must also take action to help those who have experienced abuse and exploitation.
4.	Goal Achievement at the observation point of view: • Winner • Goal achievement by using fair means • Overcome social deterrents	❖ Right to Life: everyone has the right to live, grow up and have a healthy life. ❖ Right to Freedom: we can express our selves without fear as long as we do not hurt anyone. This includes the right to have gatherings in public places, to express our views, to form groups and organizations, and to move and reside and settle in any region.

their subordinate status. The system lets her exercise power in ways that reinforce it. This sort of agency permits choices that reflect women's complicity and consent in their own subordination.

Women empowerment qualities according to human rights :

The bottom line for any empowerment requires that at the very least each woman's girl child's human rights are protected. This would provide a level playing field in the empowerment Process. The protection of a woman against the violation of her human rights itself is a protection against abuse and other crimes against women. Human rights are universal and not conditional, they cannot be taken away. The women's empowerment qualities according to human rights are presented in Table 2. It is evident from this table that the assurance of basic human rights to woman is a good beginning to empowerment.

Empowerment and agency :

An important element of empowerment that distinguishes it from other concept is agency. This implies that women themselves must be significant actors in the process of empowerment (Sen 1993, Mehra 1997). Therefore hypothetically there could be a change in indicators of gender equality, yet unless the intervention process involves women as agents of that change rather than as recipients, it would not be considered empowerment.

Agency is a concept of support systems that strengthen or empowers a person towards self acceptance, self confidence and self sufficiency as a stated goal. The family system is a primary agency in the empowerment systems for a child. The parents assist support and guide the child to realize her potential. The family system also guides and controls the child's belief systems. Therefore the control of resources and ideology of the child begin with the family, which becomes a major agency for the empowerment of the girl child.

The family empowers itself and its children through validation of the community, society, country and the world's values and systems. These values and systems are institutionalized in the educational, legal, social, cultural and other institutes (Fig. 1).

Image :

An image is the concept / vision of a person, place or thing. Images are important for setting standards and establishing ideals (idols) against which to measure attributes. The three images of Indian women Parvati, Lakshmi and Saraswati are from the Indian mythology. They become ideals / idols of worship of female perfection. Their attributes are detailed in. Furthermore Indian women have been classified

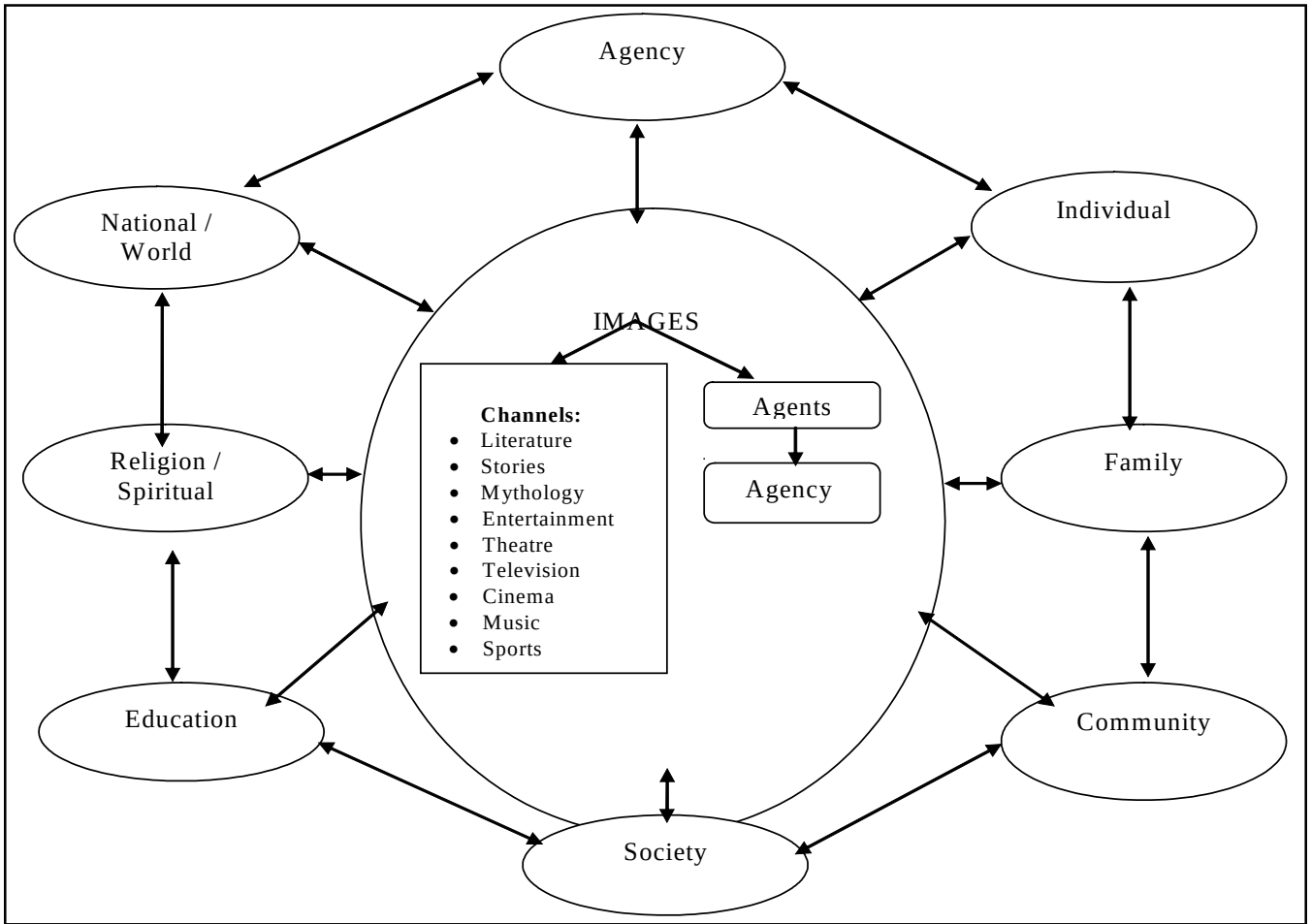

Fig. 1 : Relationship of agency and images

Table 3: Agency and image

Agency	Expression of images			
	Physical	Behavioural	Mental	Spiritual
Individual	• Good looks • Good clothes • Attractive	• Good speaker • Good communication with others	• Dreams	• Motivates according to once belief
Family	• Father • Mother (Suffering Mother) • Siblings (Tying a Rakhi)	• Commanding • Loving • Fighting / Sharing	• Beautiful House • Holidays	• Durga • Shiva • Father son and holy God
Community	• Ethnic dress	• Codes of conduct in rituals of birth, marriage and death	• We shall overcome	• We Shall Overcome
Society	• Dress codes of social / Professional class	• Manners • Language	• Rising in social status, falling or equity • Removing social barriers	• All are equal
Education	• Teacher students	• Teaching Language	• High academic achievement	• Good human being
Nation / World	• Maps • Rules, Laws • Flags	• Stereotypes • Hero and Villains • Patriotic	• Utopia	• Light as god spirit

physically as Padmini, Chatrini, Shankhini and Hastini. their physical attributes have been described in minute detail. Myriads of stories, legends, songs, drama, television and films pick up characters to bring these images into a contemporary context which become images for women to emulate. Subconsciously or consciously the family uses these images to inculcate concepts of selfhood in their girl child. The family therefore becomes the agent of ideological / continuity in a social cultural milieu. Fresh literature and other art forms provide contemporary images. The images old and new become fodder for imagination. They generate stories and images for the media, these new images then become agents to provide agency to family, community and society in a reciprocal way (Virdi Jyotika, 2003) Fig.1. Agency is the essence of empowerment, resources and achievements are enabling conditions and outcomes (Kabeer, 2001).

Image : Pathway to empowerment :

Positive images of goddesses, heroines, stories and cartoons provide aspirations to girls, while negative images of villains identify undesirable qualities. The reinforcement of the images begins in early life and starts within the family. These images identify gender roles which help the girls toward self image (Table 3). These self images either build or break self confidence, without which no empowerment can occur. Women themselves need to be actors in the process of empowerment. This requires self belief, self confidence to create self sufficiency (Sen, 1993 and Mehra, 1997).

Contemporary Indian women have images of powerful women from where to draw strength. Women in this decade have many more female role models for example Indira Nooyi: CEO Pepsi Co., Chanda Kochhar: CEO ICICI Bank india, Kiran Mazumdar Shaw: Chairmen president of Biocon India, Mayavati: Former CM in UP, Mamta Banerji: CM in West Bengal, Jaya Lalitha: CM Tamilnadu, (herself a film star) and Pratibha Patil: President of India. Sports has its own stars such as Saina Nehwal (Badminton), Sania Mirza (Tennis), Mary Kom (Asian Boxing Champion and Olympics Bronze winner). The increased visibility of women in power has led to defining changes in women's self image, self confidence and self sufficiency. These women prompt others to a 'can do' confidence (Somaaya Bhawana *et al.*, 2012).

Conclusion :

Images of women from mythology to role models reside in the lexicon of individuals, family, community and society. These impact the self images of girl children. The images provide agency to build self confidence. The self confidence and success in turn generate role models and heroines as images to spiral into the next level. The family is a crucial primary agency for internalizing images to build self confidence to lead to a successful woman. Agency and images form a self perpetuating spiral. It is in the interest of women's development to promote enabling images.

A review of literature on empowerment suggests that empowerment is a process not a product. It is defined as control over resources and ideology. The parents assist support and guide the child to realize her potential. The family system also guides and controls the child's belief systems. Therefore the control of resources and ideology of the child begin with the family, which becomes a major agency for the empowerment of the girl child.

An image is the concept / vision of a person, place or thing. Images are important for setting standards and establishing ideals (idols) against which to measure attributes

The reinforcement of the images begins in early life and starts within the family. These images identify gender roles which help the girls toward self image. These self images either build or break self confidence, without which no empowerment can occur. Women themselves need to be actors in the process of empowerment. This requires self belief, self confidence to create self sufficiency.

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