



Men's Experience of Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality: A Phenomenological Study in Kerala, India

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Accepted: 6 December 2022 / Published online: 24 December 2022
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Abstract

One of the more significant challenges toward achieving gender equality and women's empowerment is in overcoming the resistance of other members in the community, especially men, to social change. So often, men have stood as the gatekeepers of such change as they hold positions of authority and control over both public and domestic spaces. Men therefore have abundant influence on gender norms, and by extension on the measure of success of a women's empowerment intervention. Unfortunately, conventional program strategies have not accounted for men's support or rejection of new social behaviors, nor included mechanisms to inspire positive changes in men as well as empower women. This is largely because there is a lack of research on how men perceive women's empowerment, how these perceptions form, and the factors that influence a decision-making calculus in determining whether or not men will support such social changes. This paper takes up this issue and presents the findings of a descriptive phenomenological study of the experiences of men whose wives recently graduated from a women's empowerment project. The structure of their experience is explored using phenomenological analysis methods, and a set of important themes are defined that can be used to improve future interventions in a similar context. Notable themes identified include men's ability to acknowledge injustices faced by women and the level of understanding of and beliefs around women's role in society. This approach is a promising practice that can serve other contexts where similar challenges are faced.

Keywords Gender equality · Critical masculinity · Women's empowerment · Phenomenology · India

Introduction

Although great strides forward have been made towards achieving gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE) in India, there are still persistent challenges. India has not performed well in global rankings in closing relative gaps between women and men on health, education, economy, and politics. India has only inched forward from its 2009 rank of 114th (out of 134 countries) with a 61.5% gender equality score, to 112th in (out of 153) in 2019 with a 66.8% score (WEF, 2019). Within the same global survey, it was found that while maternal mortality and girls' average primary schooling have improved, women's formal employment, asset ownership, participation in governance,

and discrimination against women are unacceptably poor. Furthermore, progress is lagging in the areas of legal discrimination, discriminatory social norms and attitudes, and low levels of decision making by women and girls in sexual and reproductive health issues (UN Women & UN DESA, 2019). This is despite the government of India increasing its annual Gender Responsive Budgeting from 143.78 billion Indian Rupees (approximately US \$ 2 billion) to over 1.2 trillion Rupees (approximately US \$17.4 billion) over the same period of time (Ministry of Finance, 2019).

Experts have theorized that possible reasons for this slow progress include ineffective enforcement and implementation of government programs, poor strategic investment in GEWE efforts, economic and political systems that reinforce inequality and are too costly to change, and finally deeply entrenched social norms and cultural beliefs that are resistant to change (Grown et al., 2016; NITI Aayog, 2018). Of all of these possible reasons, the latter has appeared again and again as a primary challenge to achieving GEWE in the Indian context. Even with improved infrastructure and legal requirements for more equitable

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practices in public and private sectors, programs will not succeed unless there is a critical portion of the population *willing* to change their attitudes and behaviors (Coley et al., 2021a; Narayan, 2018). Culture is a primary determinant of the gender norms which organize how society operates, setting the boundaries for acceptable behaviors, funneling resources, and even defining how knowledge and meaning are created in ways that have varying effects on different groups (Parvathy & Balasubramanian, 2020). The mechanism that perpetuates existing, gender-based hierarchies of power is a classic topic of interest for sociology and gender studies as an attempt to articulate the roots of gender-based inequalities (Rosaldo & Lamphere, 1974).

Drawing from our own experience of over a decade working in this space, as well as extensive research, it is apparent that GEWE efforts are, at their heart, disruptive projects that seek to reform existing, discriminatory social norms into those that support universal access to opportunities and resources. This means transforming those systems and practices that prevent an entire segment of a population from achieving their highest potential. The disruption caused by GEWE affects everyone in a society, not just women. When women gain the skills, resources, and opportunities to emerge from positions of relative inferiority and subservience, it creates ripples of change in their entire community (Eyben et al., 2008). Those groups who benefited from the old ways, traditionally men, will likely feel a pinch as social norms shift. Further, men can be seen as gatekeepers for gender equality, as it is often specific groups of men who control most of the resources and positions of authority that require redistribution (Connell, 2005a). The benefits of GEWE may not be immediately obvious to such groups, and in fact may seem like an attack against their position and authority. It is no wonder that one of the most reported challenges to women's empowerment projects is the resistance of men and other family members (Karim & Law, 2013; Vonderlack-Navarro, 2010).

A growing body of research is now promoting the practice of engaging men and boys in GEWE programs, with the understanding that everyone needs support in transitioning to new social norms (Coley et al., 2021b; Fleming et al., 2013; MenEngage, 2014). Such publications stress that a strategic inclusion of men will not minimize or threaten the resources provided to women, but rather transform men into key stakeholders and allies. This approach has been shown to be effective especially in reducing gender-based violence and in reducing the spread of sexually-transmitted diseases (Peacock & Barker, 2014; WHO, 2010). Unfortunately, there is limited research into the nature of this resistance and the role that men play in the women's empowerment process across diverse contexts (Sudkämper, 2019). A deeper understanding is needed of the underlying social and psychological factors that lead to men either supporting or rejecting GEWE.

A Study of Men's Experience of the Women's Empowerment Project

One of the difficulties in translating theory into practice is a general lack of consensus on what the "problem" with men is. Terms like hegemonic or toxic masculinity have proven a useful starting point for describing general characteristics of a patriarchal society dominated by elite groups of men (Connell, 2005b). Classically, hegemonic masculinity describes a social power dynamic wherein a certain "ideal manliness" is given power, and dominant groups assert and perpetuate this ideal through the enforcement of certain social norms that implicitly require the preservation of existing power structures. However, when these terms are used indiscriminately, it typically leads to a narrow definition of men that excludes the natural diversity in a population as well as more subtle or ambivalent forms of gender biases that must be understood contextually before they are judged (Lomas, 2013). Within critical masculinity scholarship in India, scholars have found fault with the narrow view of hegemonic masculinity as it concentrates too much on sexual behaviors and gender stereotypes as the primary determinants of hegemonic ideals (Duncanson, 2015; Sekharan, 2019). This is problematic (in India as elsewhere), as expectations of a man's ideal behavior are influenced by multiple, intersecting identities influenced by context, caste, religion, economic class, and ethnicity (Jeffrey et al., 2008; Singh, 2017).

This is an important structure to note within the realm of gender studies as it opens space for introducing alternative masculinities that can better support GEWE (Chopra, 2003). Such competing claims over men's actions complicate the expression of masculinity and require more study for a proper understanding, especially when translating theory into practice. The study presented here is meant to contribute to this field, and provide some qualitative evidence of potential factors that describe men who are allies of GEWE. Such information is useful in designing future interventions by providing a more nuanced understanding of indicators for project success and strategies for building support among men and the larger community.

This paper presents a study of the husbands of women who successfully completed a women's empowerment and vocational training project. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with these men, and a descriptive phenomenological analysis followed. This study is an offshoot of a larger Women's Empowerment Project (WE Project) conducted in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, India, between 2012 and 2014 (Wagner & Panda, 2014). The WE Project sought to empower over 3000 women in these states through providing a strategic combination of vocational education and life skills tied closely to community service. The multiple forms of skilling and community engagement that formed the WE Project intervention strategy were delivered using innovative, technology

enhanced educational methods. These included desktop and tablet instruction using content accessible to people from all educational and language backgrounds, supplemented by regular interactions with subject-matter experts. Opportunities for applying their new skills for income generation were offered in a more secure and guided environment to ensure increased participation and lower risk. Community engagement programs were done after extensive meetings with local government to ensure greater community support and to encourage policy changes for wider impact. The project was considered a success with measurable increases in major indicators of empowerment, especially increased self-confidence, participating in decision making at home, and control over personal finances (Coley et al., 2021b).

A small sample of the husbands of graduates from the WE Project were selected for this study. These men were interviewed and asked to describe their experience of the project. The interviews included both open-ended as well as structured questions to encourage respondents to reflect on the phenomena in question. The guiding questions included elements from the Attitudes toward Women Scale (Nelson, 1988; Spence & Hahn, 1997) that were adapted to the Indian context. There were also questions made to understand the respondents experience of the WE Project and on gender and masculinity in general. These questions were translated into Malayalam and back-translated to English for improved reliability.

Methodology

The Colaizzi method of descriptive phenomenology (Colaizzi, 1978) was used in this study, with adaptations based on more recent applications and lessons learned to improve its efficacy (Edward & Welch, 2011; Englander, 2012; Groenewald, 2004). This method was chosen for its ability to produce nuanced descriptions of individual experiences that respect and maintain the original context of the respondents, and has been used successfully in similar studies (Valsala & Devanathan, 2021). In choosing participants for this study, purposive sampling was used. This is an acceptable approach within the phenomenological method as, “the phenomenon dictates the method (not vice-versa) including the type of participants” (Hycner, 1999, p. 156). Purposive sampling is considered by S. Kruger as the most important kind of non-probability sampling as such a sample ensures the selection of those who “have had experiences relating to the phenomenon to be researched” (Kruger, 1988, p. 150), and from whom data can be used to make important contributions to the structure and character of the experience under investigation (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 139).

A decision was made early on to limit the number of individuals to those men who were in close connection to

the participants of the WE Project, preferably husbands of participants. Given the length of time between the end of the WE Project (March, 2014) and the date of data collection (August, 2019), it was also important to further limit the possible respondents to those whose wives are still active in their SHG and earning and income from similar activities—as this will ensure the project experience is still fresh in the minds of the respondents. In terms of the WE Project deliverables, such women would be considered as “successful participants” who continue to exhibit proof of the empowerment process. While this approach may limit the experience to only positive examples of empowerment work, it is important to mention that these respondents also had contact with project participants who were not successful. This is because in every project location, there were multiple groups from the same community, with each group having a unique experience. As such, they could reflect on what made their experience positive and compare it to others who might have struggled more.

It is common practice in phenomenological research to select between two to ten respondents, considered as sufficient to reach saturation (Boyd, 2001). Creswell (1998, p. 65 & 113) recommends “long interviews with up to 10 people” for a phenomenological study. With this in mind, a canvassing of field team records was done to see who might qualify for this study. Of the 250+ SHGs from the original WE Project, five groups have kept in communication with the field team, and two were currently active in income generating activities that started during the project period. Fortunately, one of these groups was willing to participate in this study. The SHG from Kozhikode (a city in northern Kerala) consists of seven women, all of whom have maintained their SHG since its official formation in 2013. They have a small, independent tailoring business with a history of handling local, national, and even international orders. Six of the women’s husbands were available to participate, along with one local man who was closely involved in the project as a volunteer community organizer. All of these men share similar demographic qualities, including coming from modest socio-economic backgrounds (technically above poverty line, but still at risk for dropping below poverty line). All of the men identified as Hindu, from the “General Caste” group, and were born and have lived their lives in central Kerala. The respondents also represent state averages for educational attainment, with all completing 12th grade, and two attaining advanced degrees. Demographic differences were not taken into account in this phenomenological study, although future work would benefit from including a more diverse sample.

The seven men were each interviewed individually in a place that was removed from other people so their responses would not be overheard and encourage more honest and direct communication. Each of the interviews were between

45 to 75 min long, continuing until the topic was exhausted or when respondents introduced no new perspectives. The interviews were both audio and video recorded after gaining informed consent. The audio files were transcribed and translated by native Malayalam speakers fluent in English. In reviewing the interview responses, the researchers felt that saturation had indeed been reached within the seven participants and therefore analysis could proceed.

The descriptive phenomenological process began with an initial reading to get a sense of the “whole” or the general understanding of the respondent and what was said. Second, a re-reading is done where the researcher marks each of the individual thoughts or ideas that the respondent shares. These are called “meaning units” and serve only as an organizational tool to make the transcript easier to process. Third, these meaning units are “transformed” into explicit statements of what the meaning unit is meant to convey. Giorgi, and others, emphasize the role of “free imaginative variation” in this phase of the analysis as a means to uncover more nuanced meanings of the respondents’ words (Giorgi, 2012; Groenewald, 2004). The third step entails clustering these explicit statements into themes based on shared meanings, values, and relevant contributions to the understanding of the phenomena. We refer to these as “minor themes.” Fourth, steps one through three are replicated for each transcript. Minor themes from each transcript are compared and further organized into major themes that capture the shared experiences and meanings by the study group. This sorting also relied on the imaginative variation of the researcher to identify commonalities that could justify further organization. Steps five and six include creating an exhaustive description of the process thus far and then refining the major themes to create a fundamental structure of the phenomenon under study. Finally, the seventh step is to discuss findings with independent reviewers to ensure credibility, having these experts replicate elements of the analysis process to compare findings. This seven-step process provides the structure for a rigorous interpretation of the raw data so that the essential nature of a phenomenon can be articulated. Many examples of this method can be found in peer-reviewed journals (Giorgi, 1985; Ritanti et al., 2017; Shosha, 2012).

Results

These seven steps were followed for the interview transcripts, with the results detailed below. The NVIVO software was used to conduct the analysis, providing effective organization and graphic representation of the transcript data so that sorting and analysis could take place. Once the transcripts were satisfactorily translated into English, including confirmation with the respondents that the translation

matched the original, the researcher read and re-read each of them to gain an understanding of what was being expressed. For each transcript, steps two (marking and translating meaning units) and three (organizing meaning units into minor themes) were conducted in tandem. This was repeated for each of the transcripts before moving to step four (organizing minor themes into Major Themes). The naming and organizing process utilized the phenomenological tool of imaginative variation, approaching the initial meaning unit from varying perspectives, positions, roles, and functions in order to “arrive at structural descriptions of an experience, the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced,” (Moustakas, 1994, p 83). In other words, the researcher examined all available data, including visual cues and non-verbal communication, and experiences with the respondent population to produce thematic statements that are meant to capture the essence of what was said in a way that exposes any structures or trends that could be relevant to the phenomenon under study.

To ensure a level of validity, this process of translating statements into meaning units, organizing meaning units into themes and then major themes was replicated for a sample of the data by third-party researchers. To ensure inter-rater reliability, any differences in interpretation and organization were discussed and clarified before the final list of major themes was made. The purpose of this was to account for any biases of the primary researcher and to maintain the rigor of the phenomenological process.

A total of 197 meaning units were identified across all seven respondent transcripts. From these, 67 minor themes were generated that were further consolidated into 10 major themes as a result of comparing themes between respondents. These major themes have been further organized into four categories based on shared characteristics. These categories were created using inductive reasoning as a convenience for communicating the findings in a more effective manner. Together, they offer a structure for the experience men have of women’s empowerment. This process is represented in Fig. 1, and the descriptive organization can be seen in Table 1.

Understanding of and Beliefs Around Women’s Role in Society

The first category, understanding of and beliefs around women’s role in society, contains those major themes where personal values and the respondents’ expectations of women are defined. These include definitions and justifications of gender-based responsibilities to the family and other tasks. This is also where consequences of breaking tradition are arise, as well as conditions where alternative behaviors are acceptable (e.g., a woman can work outside the home so long as she can complete all the required domestic duties

Fig. 1 Descriptive phenomenological process of identifying themes

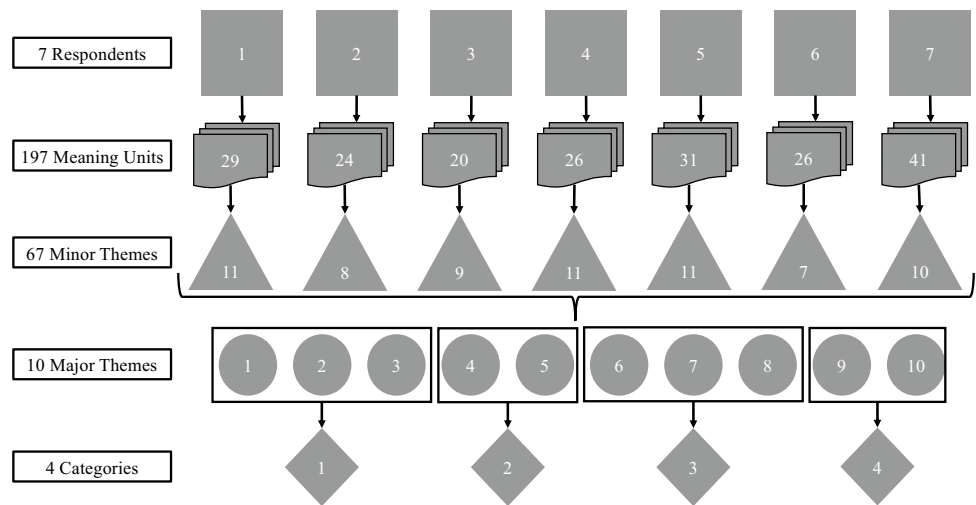


Table 1 Organization of major themes into categories

Category	MT#	Major theme
Men’s understanding of and beliefs around women’s role in society	1	Alcohol abuse is bad for everyone, but while normal for men, it is especially bad for women as it reflects badly on society and goes against cultural values. This is because women are the representatives of a society’s values and shoulder this responsibility more than men
	2	The duty of women is to care for the domestic sphere including children and the husband. She is best suited for this role because women have a greater capacity for compassion
	3	The husband is more likely to support his wife engaging in work outside the home if and only if she can complete her domestic duties first. It is seen as a benign activity that does not disrupt their normal life
A reflection on the obstacles that women face in life as a result gendered social norms	4	Women are vulnerable to attacks or harm if they travel alone, and this causes great worry for the husbands. This is why they prefer her to not travel, or if she must, to travel with a group
	5	Women still face cultural, social, and personal obstacles to WE, but with enough personal strength, social support, and SHG success, they can overcome these
Describing the ways women change from empowerment	6	The money the women earn is negligible, although a nice addition to the family income and therefore appreciated by the husband
	7	The women have experienced a positive growth in their mental space as a result of the course and growing social support. The social support received was necessary for this
	8	The women have gained a lot of social support, status, and respect from the community due to their social service work
An ability to acknowledge injustice, particularly the problem with men who are against WE and how they can change	9	Gendered social norms are rooted in the culture and reinforced by personal values. These are difficult to change to support WE, but with the right information, positive examples, and especially the support of friends or family, they can be improved
	10	There are 3 reasons men are against WE: (1) Social norms: They have an ego problem that makes them distrust women’s purity when she leaves the home. (2) Personal fear: They are threatened or jealous of a woman succeeding as this will make him look bad. (3) Limited exposure: They do not understand that women can also be successful and gain honor from working outside the home

first). Another major theme in this category is the belief that women carry the responsibility of family and community morality, and therefore are held to a higher standard than men. This can be seen reflected in the following excerpts from the interviews.

In response to the question, “How did your family react to your wife joining the SHG and working regularly outside the home?” Respondent 4 replied,

There are no issues at home when she goes [to her SHG activities]. She leaves only after finishing her work at home. However, when she keeps the work pending, it is only then there will be some problem, right? Most days she wakes up early, finishes her chores, and goes to the center. So no issues. — Respondent 4

This same sentiment was reflected by each of the respondents in some way. They expressed that only when a woman’s domestic responsibilities are performed without fail, will she be allowed to do other activities. Such attitudes reflect a deeper cultural norm and moral standard that regulates a woman’s opportunities and acceptable behaviors. It is important to note, however, that none of the respondents mentioned any strict rules or even hinted at possible punishments that would be given to women who acted against these norms. Perhaps in other communities that follow more strict gender-differentiated practices negative consequences would be more pronounced (e.g., *purdha* or *ghunghat* practices of seclusion and veiling in certain North Indian populations).

In response to the question, “It is quite common for men to drink alcohol in our society; however, we do not see women drinking in the same way. Why do you think this is?” Respondent 1 answered,

This is our culture. Women have been given a position in society along with expectations of how they should behave that is based on values. There is a destruction of values when a woman destroys herself [by drinking alcohol]. There is a saying among us that if the mother is good, the country becomes good. A mother should not destroy herself. In whichever way [men] can stop them from doing that, we do it... This is because only a woman can become a mother and this carries a *dharma* [moral responsibility]... If women are destroyed, the family itself will be broken. — Respondent 1.

This was the most expressive of the respondents’ comments on women’s role in the family and responsibility to represent communal morality, but was a repeated theme throughout the study. These feelings here are complex and layered, demonstrating both conventionally understood gender discrimination (in that these men wanted to control the movement and behaviors of women) as well as a deep concern and respect for the women’s wellbeing and contribution to the family. Some may categorize these responses

as benevolent sexism, defined by Glick and Fiske (Glick & Fiske, 1997, p. 123) as “Subjectively positive (for the sexist) attitudes toward women in traditional roles: protective paternalism, idealization of women, and desire for intimate relations.” This is in contrast with hostile sexism that encompasses the negative equivalents of each dimension of the benevolent form (ibid). Such an attitude toward women may still reflect deeply held assumptions and biases about women’s inferiority to men that can stand in the way of women’s empowerment. However, they may also represent a man’s willingness to support women’s empowerment if he can learn to recognize the positive impact such a process can have on the family and larger community. As this man (and the others who shared similar responses), do support their wives in their new activities, it is likely that women’s empowerment can be understood positively within their value system. This is also reflected in the other major themes.

Reflections on the Obstacles Women Face in Society

The second category, reflections on the obstacles women face in society, are those major themes of men acknowledging the need for women’s empowerment based on their own understanding of women’s challenges. In these themes, the extent of their understanding is revealed. Common social issues are elaborated in these major themes, the most important of which are women’s safety and vulnerability to physical harm if she leaves her safe environment (home or community). Other obstacles center around the limited extent to which society will support a woman in business ventures. For each of these, the respondents believe that with enough support from family and friends a woman will be able to overcome such challenges. The following excerpts from the respondents fall under these major themes.

In response to the question, “Your wife may have to travel as part of her new work, going to nearby towns or cities to buy materials or conduct business. How do you feel about her traveling like this? Do you have an opinion on women traveling?” Respondent 7 said,

If she must go, there should be someone with her to ensure her safety while travelling... She isn’t used to these kinds of trips because she hasn’t gone anywhere far away. I don’t have any problem with her traveling for work if it is necessary, but there is a need for security. At least four or five women should go along with her before I will allow it. — Respondent 7

The condition for approving his wife’s travel is some assurance of her safety. Like with the previous major themes, concern for a woman’s safety is a complex mixture of value judgments and assumptions. There is a clear power dynamic

here, where men maintain some control over women's freedom of movement; however, it is rooted in a concern for her wellbeing based on their understanding of other social realities. Sexual harassment and other gender-based violence is a recognized issue in India. The men here have taken on the role of protector as well as head of the family. It is also interesting that this respondent said his wife does not have much experience moving outside her community, as it points to a kind of social seclusion that must be common for women here. Reflecting on this major theme, we can better understand the limits or conditions placed on women's movement.

In response to the question, "How have you and your community responded to your wife's new activities and earning some money?" Respondent 5 replied,

Women are most often confined to their family and taking care of its needs. Now I see these women helping around the community. What I feel when I see this I cannot put into words. They are able to do all this because of the support they give and get within the group. Otherwise it would not be possible. Now I am even ready and willing to join and help out.
— Respondent 5

At this point, respondent 5 became visibly emotional and seemed very proud of his wife and her accomplishments. As was explained earlier, the women's empowerment project that his wife participated in included social service and learning about how to mobilize their community towards sustainable development. Many of the respondents linked the positive results that came out of the social service (e.g., respect from community members) with their continued financial success in their SHG work. This theme is also closely linked with the positive changes that occurred as a result of empowerment. The self-confidence that the individual women and SHG members gained together is seen as a critical factor in the women's ability to overcome personal and social obstacles to success.

What is especially fascinating from these responses is the personal transformation *the men* went through while observing their wives succeed and gain community respect. Not only were they able to better reflect on the obstacles women face but also felt inspired to support their wife as she succeeds in her new activities. Such a transformative introspection is important to note as it represents an expansion of their existing value system to accommodate their wives' new behaviors and characteristics, while still maintaining the same core values. There is evidence that personal empowerment can be increased by this kind of prosocial behavior, including community service and charity work (Corsun & Enz, 1999). The present study suggests that prosocial behavior can also build community support and create a positive transformation in gender norms, although future research is needed to confirm this.

Perceptions of How His Wife's Life Has Improved Post-project

The third category, descriptions of how the positive changes in their wives since the project, is a collection of major themes that describe how empowerment is understood by the respondents. A majority of the themes here revolve around the improvements in the women's mental space (self-confidence, willingness to move around outside the home, increased energy, and enthusiasm); however, there was also some reflection on the benefits this has had for the family. The themes also include a description of how their community has become more supportive because of the kinds of activities that the women are now engaged in.

In response to the question, "What changes did you notice in your wife as a result of her participation in the WE Project?" Respondent 4 answered,

My wife did not have any real work before this project, but now she's very energetic in whatever she's doing...I noticed when she became more involved in the SHG her self confidence rose. Now she can do a lot of things and can do more things by herself. She goes for a lot of work by herself. — Respondent 4

This respondent spoke with pride, but also with an edge of surprise or wonder at his wife's improved self-confidence and increased enthusiasm to be active. This leads to a number of interesting interpretations. One is that the men are surprised that such qualities could develop in their partner, as if it is an unexpected positive characteristic that women often do not have. It could be due to a lack of exposure to women behaving in this way. Some men commented on their joy at being able to discuss financial matters with his wife, or to feel confident she can share in some of his decision making responsibility. These responses provide a more nuanced understanding of the common stereotype that women lack the same capacity to succeed in the public space as men.

Another interpretation of this theme is to focus on the under-handed compliment of his wife's new-found energy. There is an assumption that her normal state is one of lethargy or even laziness. This contradicts earlier statements of his wife's many duties at home and how important it is that she finishes all of this before leaving the house. This could be because he has devalued domestic work typically done by women and only now appreciates her efforts because she is engaged in activities more in line with his definition of "real work." Such sentiments are well researched in feminist theories and can be useful in further understanding these subconscious biases (Papanek, 1973; Reskin, 1988).

In response to the question, "How did the community or family respond to the WE Project participants after the project?" Respondent 6 said,

The changes in their family relationships are noticeable. Relationships within the family have improved as have their surroundings. The women are able to take a leadership role in social issues in their communities. Otherwise in the villages, a woman's role is restricted to the home. Now we see them step out into their communities, interact with others, and help solve social issues in their communities such as cleanliness, alcoholism etc... The people in the community have been noticing this and happily talking about it. I have not heard anything negative from anyone. — Respondent 6

This reflection is telling of the important role social support plays in GEWE projects. In the impact assessment of the WE Project, a significant relationship was identified between levels of empowerment indicators and levels of family support. More specifically, that perceived level of family support, and especially support from husbands, was a predictor for project success (Coley et al., 2021b). Utterances like the one by Respondent 6 make it clear that much of the community support was built after the women's SHGs engaged in prosocial behavior. Giving back to the community by working to solve common social problems is a clear demonstration of the positive consequences of women's empowerment. If one of the main barriers to women's empowerment projects is unstable social support, then an effective strategy could be to introduce more prosocial components to such projects.

Characteristics of Men Who Oppose Women's Empowerment

The fourth and final category, reflections on why some men oppose WE, includes major themes on the characteristics and behaviors common among men who do not agree with women's empowerment. These themes are also inherently self-reflective and include respondents' views of their own culture and communities (MT# 9) and the pressures of personal beliefs (MT# 10). The distinction is subtle, but important. Some of the characteristics could be called "toxic masculinity," but this phrase is problematic and an oversimplification (Coley et al., 2021a). Many of the examples given were extreme cases of domestic violence or abuse, with the respondents justifying these acts as a lack of trust in a woman's honor. Other themes explore the jealousy of men for women succeeding, overuse of alcohol, and the negative influence of friends. In exploring this theme from the data, three reasons for a man's opposition to women's empowerment were found: social norms have made men distrusting of women's fidelity if she leaves the home, men feel jealous or threatened by strong women, and lack of exposure to alternative lifestyles that are still positive and support their own ethics. An example of each of these three is given in quotes below.

In response to the question, "Is it possible for men to change their beliefs on gender equality?" Respondent 7 replied,

I am one hundred per cent positive. I have many experiences [of this]. If he has two good friends then a man will definitely change. If he has a bad set of friends, then we can't expect anything. Friends can change your ideas. Especially if he meets them regularly, the change is guaranteed. — Respondent 7

This statement points to the idea that in some ways, gender inequality is the result of peer-pressure on men to act in ways that limit women's autonomy. Public status or the perception of peers in a community is an important form of social capital and also dictates individual behaviors and beliefs. Further, this community, along with many parts of South India, traditionally practice social norms based on kinship structures carry with it many restrictions and freedoms with regard to female autonomy (Dyson & Moore, 1983). These practices are enforced by the community, and any alternative behaviors would also need the approval of the community. These responses reflect some of the social changes over the past decades, in that the "community" is less about the natal kinship groups and now more closely tied to immediate friend or close family groups. The recommendation by Respondent 7 is repeated by others in this study, and it is worth considering how future GEWE interventions can create groups of male "champions of change" who encourage other men to make personal changes. Researchers are starting to recognize that this approach to collective action and theories of social change with regard to GEWE will rely on convincing men to reevaluate their own biases (Sudkämper et al., 2020).

In response to the question, "Have you ever faced negativity from your peers for supporting your wife's new work?" Respondent 2 said,

There's nothing wrong with gender equality, right? [nervous laughter]. But sometimes I get other men teasing me. I work with men from North India, and once in a while my wife will come to drive me for some chores in the nearby town. She comes with our small scooter and naturally I will sit in the back and she will keep driving. Then the men will shout, 'Hey you can't sit behind a woman! Men shouldn't put ourselves down like this!' This is because that's all the education they have, they have not reached our level yet. — Respondent 2

This is an interesting response as the respondent is able to recognize both the nature of more common gender stereotypes (i.e., that men should not be seen in any way lesser than women), and also the flaws with such norms. However,

his non-verbal communication in this statement included uneasy laughter and signs of embarrassment. This belies some potential inner conflict with his statement, in that he may understand that such gender biases are unfounded, but that he still faces some negative consequences from acting against them. At least at this time or in this context, he is able to withstand these negative consequences and maintain his alternative values. It is conceivable that in other contexts, the negative consequences may be more persuasive and change his behavior. The role of peer groups is reinforced here, as with the previous example. This respondent at the end of this statement says, “they have not reached *our* level yet,” (emphasis added). This means he has other people in his social circle who also support more gender-equal values, and with whom he identifies with. The social capital and support he gets from this alternative group seems to be enough for him to withstand the negativity from this work group who criticize him for behaving in ways that go against common gender norms.

The final major theme in this section incorporates a number of variants of the same overall principle: explanations for men’s violence against women. Overall, three primary reasons were found in the analysis of the respondents: (1) personal ego tied to rigid adherence to social norms, (2) fear or jealousy of women’s growing influence and concern for loss of their own power, and (3) lack of exposure to alternative contexts where positive outcomes of women’s empowerment can be seen. The following quotes from respondents give an example of these.

In response to the question, “You said some men are violent against women for acting against the norms. Why do they do that? Why do you think some men are against women’s empowerment?” Respondents 1 and 7 replied,

Those men likely think that, ‘Before we used to be the ones doing this work. We should be the ones doing this. Such women who act out are trying to make a name for themselves.’ These men are jealous of a woman’s growth. If she does good work in her society and reaches a position greater than the Sarpanch [local government official], there might be people who are jealous of that. So their goal will be to pull her down.
— Respondent 1

Such a man doesn’t trust his wife. He doesn’t let his wife go outside the house because he doubts her. This is maybe because he doesn’t understand [her new work] properly, and will always ask, ‘Why is she going? Where is my wife going?’ That must be the thing, that could be the reason for stopping her and hurting her. — Respondent 7

Respondent 1’s answer contributes to the first and second variations on the major theme, namely, the characterization of a strong sense of ego and superiority based on existing

social norms, as well as a jealous fear of losing their own status as women progress. Respondent 1 shared that men who are violent with women who try to assert authority in a public setting are likely afraid of losing their own influence, and justified their behavior by appealing to conventional gender norms that restrict women to domestic duties.

The response from Respondent 7 also contributes to the first and second variants of the theme, but the respondent explains the man’s negative behavior by concluding that he must not fully understand the new work or new behaviors of his wife. A lack of understanding of the benefits of women’s empowerment, as well as lack of exposure or experiences with such changes, could lead to sluggish acceptance of it. The doubt over the wife’s actions outside the home is also likely tied to conventional gender norms which dictate that women are better off staying within the domestic sphere to protect her from other men. A woman who seeks out work outside invites speculation into her motivation for doing so, with an assumption that it must be immoral. Respondent 7 is trying to articulate that such misconceptions must be removed if we desire men’s support of women’s empowerment projects. In some sense, Respondent 7 and the others who made this point are claiming that it is not a man’s fault if he rejects gender equality, as it is simply the way he has been raised or the culture in which he lives. Whether or not it is accurate, he places the responsibility of changing this narrative on the women who seek empowerment, and on the implementation agency leading the projects.

Discussion

The DP analysis revealed ten major themes that can be organized into four categories: (1) men’s understanding of and beliefs around women’s role in society, (2) a reflection on the obstacles that women face in life as a result gendered social norms, (3) describing the ways women change from empowerment, and (4) an ability to acknowledge injustice, particularly the problem with men who are against WE and how they can change. From this, the phenomenon of “what happens to men after women are empowered,” can begin to be articulated.

Based on these thematic categories, we can propose a structure for the phenomenon. First of all, the experience requires that men are able to recognize some elements of women’s empowerment, and to acknowledge that it is a positive change. This assumes that the man is aware of some social inequalities or obstacles that women face (including from other men). There is also an internal tension between the recognition of GEWE’s value and the social norms and traditions that he subscribes too. This tension forms the background for the entire experience, which side eventually

takes control seems to depend on the kind of friends/relatives he mingles with and his personal experiences of the cost vs benefit of GEWE. The men interviewed seemed generally supportive of the WE project and his wife's activities; however, it was clear that it was only because these things did not overly disrupt the status quo: the domestic division of labor was maintained, family values were not overly compromised, and there were obvious benefits as a result of any changes.

The statements and phenomenological assessments covered in this study provide deeper insight into the thought process behind what is happening to the men, and specifically how cultural norms and stereotypes are perpetuated. It is widely accepted in social psychology that stereotypes and resultant inequalities are a living phenomenon, rather than a static one, that is constantly being reinforced by the individuals within it (Kashima & Yeung, 2010; Ridgeway & Balkwell, 1997). Further research on legitimacy and justice has found that individuals often equate what *is* with what they believe is right (Cook, 1975). This belief system is made up of a process of forming *schemas* or representations of knowledge and information used to make judgements and everyday decision making (Hunzaker, 2014).

Such insight suggests that stereotypes act as one tool that individuals use to justify existing discrimination, in order to maintain a belief in the justness and legitimacy of the current social order (Jost et al., 2004). Within this current study, what is seen in the reflective statements by Respondent 1 and 7 in the last set of quotations, are individuals in the process of actively changing their own cultural norms. Existing biases and behavioral expectations are recognized, dissected, and either rejected or transformed to meet a new standard value. In this case, the new value is an appreciation for women's empowerment and a dissection of common behavioral patterns that conflict with the new value.

Evidence of this shift in personal values emerges from the analysis, which describe how the respondents have judged this apparently new experience of women's empowerment. There seems to be particular conditions that are considered, whether consciously or unconsciously, before a final judgment is made that are important in leading to either support or rejection. From the ten major themes, these conditions include whether or not the woman is able to carry on her existing domestic duties, whether or not his wife has greater wellbeing post-project, and finally how his wife's new activities and attitudes match with his existing values. In evaluating these conditions, there are personal factors for the men that play a role in forming judgments that include the level of exposure to other women demonstrating a similar lifestyle (and its positive effects), the level of acceptance the husband perceives from key members of his community and peer group, and the relative financial need for a second income.

Once decided, the men find their own ways of justifying their position to others.

It is hopeful and encouraging to see that perceptions of GEWE can, and do, change in positive ways. It is possible for WE interventions to inspire the entire community, even those who are traditionally opposed to the idea, not just the women for whom the project is designed. This reflection on the complexity behind the experience of women's empowerment by men is important for stakeholders working towards gender equality because it offers more data points in designing effective interventions. Applying this new information in the design, monitoring, and evaluation of programs can help to better situate such efforts in the context of the target populations. This is especially promising for contexts where it is clear that men stand as an obstacle towards progress, or where traditional cultural norms are particularly rigid.

Limitations

This study was conducted with men in a single location in the state of Kerala, India. All of the insights drawn from the respondents' experiences may only reflect the norms of this particular geographic context. It is important to understand this study in the light of the unique culture and traditions of Kerala, the social climate of this particular community, the caste, class, and religion of the study population, and other demographic variables. However, these characteristics of the target population form only the backdrop of a global phenomenon. There is evidence of men opposing women's empowerment across India, and in fact the world.

A further limitation of this study is the lack of longitudinal, or comparative data from the respondents. At the time of the WE Project, this current study was yet to be identified as the phenomenon of male-opposition was less understood as a critical factor for project success. Therefore, it was not possible to collect pre-project data on the husbands, allowing for longitudinal comparisons. As an aside, the philosophy behind the phenomenological approach diverges from the more traditional comparative study where comparisons with a control group is more vital to the analysis. Phenomenology seeks to provide a thick description (i.e., the lived experience) of respondents, ideally uncovering essential characteristics of the individual's experiences. Such a thick description does not require a control or comparison group to reach this goal. In future studies, however, alternative approaches may yield interesting findings that can supplement the discussion from this study. For example, it would be interesting to compare the perceptions of men directly associated with the project to those of men externally. Likewise, future studies would benefit from including men whose wives were *not* successful in completing the WE Project, to see if there are any differences between groups.

While the authors do not attempt to propose findings of this study, including the ten major themes found in the DP analysis and the discussion of the structure of the phenomenon, as a global theory, it is evidence that the exercise itself is a useful tool. The findings have given a deeper insight into the larger study of the impact of the Women's Empowerment Project and have helped to explain why the project was successful, insofar that it was.

Conclusion

This exploration into the experiences of men after a women's empowerment project provides some insight into the potential judgement calculus of a dominant group making space for a traditionally subordinate group to prosper. Researchers and other stakeholders interested in promoting GEWE would benefit from incorporating such information into their project designs. Such research grounds our understanding of the empowerment process into the lived experience of the larger community, highlighting the relational aspects of empowerment. This study is meant to contribute to the gap in GEWE research, where more robust explanations are given for why men support or reject women's empowerment.

Through the thick descriptions produced by the phenomenological method, it was found that for the men in the study, the extent of their personal transformation was dependent largely on the social capital gained by their wives altruistic activities, especially acceptance of their wives' work by their family and by other men in their peer group. Another important factor is the respondents' own reflective capacity to recognize both the gendered injustice or unequal social norms of their society, as well as the positive impact of women's empowerment on their personal life, family wellbeing, and for the wider community. Further application of the phenomenological method in broader contexts and with other members in the community is a promising avenue for GEWE research to improve the implementation of successful projects.

Acknowledgements The authors would like to acknowledge the invaluable guidance and support provided by Dr. Rao R Bhavani and the women and men working at the Amrita Center for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality, and most of all the chancellor of Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Mata Amritanandamayi Devi.

The research study was submitted to and approved by the Ethics Committee of the authors' institution (approval # IEC_AL-CWEGE-AVV_007), which includes respecting the anonymity and securing informed consent of all participants.

Data Availability The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available to protect the confidentiality of study respondents, but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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