Social Inclusion Through
Women Empowerment and Improvement in
Higher Education

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Khandwala Publishing House
Changing Life Skills of Women with Altered Socio-cultural Milieu: from the Lens of Women

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INTRODUCTION

Culturology or Philosophy of culture is a discipline concerned with deeper understanding, description, analysis and prediction of cultures as a whole, or as trends of changes. Needless to say study of culture is one of the most significant studies in our postmodern era. To quote from the encyclopaedia of religion and ethics,

"To Becon, the world is indebted for the term, as well as for the Philosophy of culture. While of itself the notion of culture may be broad enough to express all forms of spiritual life in man - intellectual, religious, ethical. It is best understood intensively as humanity’s effort to assert its inner and independent being."

As such, we may say that, the changes in culture, and trends always amuse us. With globalisation and its impact the study of its cultural significance on a multi diverse nation like India becomes all the more interesting.

‘Feminism’, ‘Gender studies’, and ‘women’s empowerment’, are key words today in academic circles and also to a certain extent in the larger society. Considerable amount of research has happened and is happening in the paradigm of ‘feminism’ and ‘Gender studies’. As a result of focused social movement, legal provisions, constitutional amendments, the postmodern urban woman is definitely moving ahead and is becoming empowered to a certain extent. Political dimension, being the most salient dimension of her empowerment, women are becoming active in political sphere as well (which was considered to be a male dominated field all along). In short, much water has flown under the bridge and the postmodern woman has acquired voluntarily or involuntarily, many new life skills or social skills, making her more empowered. To name a few, organisational skills, economic skills, travelling, using and moving confidently in public spaces etc.

The present research is based against this backdrop. The aim of this research in this context is to find out how postmodern women look at the 'life skill'. What is the lens used by them? Is it coloured with feminism? Is it gender biased even today? Or are women yet naïve and not aware of the deep cultural changes which have already taken place in our social spaces? Yes! And most importantly, is there any specific life skill, which emerges as the
most significant life skill, cutting the edges of all paradigms? If yes ... what is this life skill? What meaning is attached to it by women?

**METHODOLOGY**

- **Paradigm of the study**

  On view of Dr. Shefali Pandya, “the concept of paradigm refers to the divergence in vision, custom and tradition. It assumes that science has different sets of assumptions, commitments, procedures, and theories of social events and phenomena.”

  Before endeavouring into any research project, it becomes necessary to get rooted in a particular paradigm to facilitate the social construction of rationality or knowledge. The present study about women’s perception of life skills is rooted in a constructive research paradigm that assumes ‘reality’ to be multiple, complex and also intangible. Needless to say the aim of the research is to rely on the participants’ views of their situation and to understand their positions about it. To talk in the context of present research the emphasis is levied on how woman participants are viewing the life skills. Which life skills matter to them considerably? What is the nature of the baton (the life skills) which they genuinely look forward to pass on to the next generation? Keeping the discipline of constructive paradigm in mind, an open-ended questionnaire was framed and freedom was given to the participants to express their comments.

- **Theoretical perspective (objective and rationale of the study)**

  The present research work has actually borrowed from many disciplines including psychology, sociology, feminism etc. Precisely due to its multidimensional nature, it is positioned in post-modernistic theoretical perspective. As opposed to classical theorists, champions of post-modernism (like Richard Rorty, Michel Foucault) believe that;

  1. Most theoretical concepts are defined by their role in the conjectured theoretical network
  2. Theoretical network is incomplete
  3. Theoretical concepts are partially interpreted or interpretations are open to changes.

  This is so because human social reality is very intricate and it is not possible to have ‘the final word’ on it. Or rather, it is not conducive to have the final word on reality.

  The nature of the present research is small. It is done on a very small section of our society. Moreover, it is trying to understand and say something about an intangible reality like ‘life skills’ and their perception. In other words, it is trying to ‘the truth’ about perception of life skills by women, but to make an attempt to understand how woman participants view their particular cultural space, and what voices are to be heard in this space.

**Conceptual Framework**

For the purpose of knowledge construction in the following research, a certain conceptual framework is used. The survey (about which we shall be discussing in the next section) basically revolves round the notion of ‘Life Skill’ and its ‘perception’. It has ventured to find out whether ‘Gender’, ‘Influence of Feminism’, ‘Globalisation’ etc. have really coloured the cultural spaces of women or more specifically the perception of cultural spaces, by women. What narration is the post-modern woman making about the cultural space created through certain life skills? An attempt is also made to find out whether women are really deeply aware about their socio cultural realities, which is a typical philosophical concern. In this endeavour the following basic concepts have helped us in knowledge construction. They are:

1. **Life Skills**

   A life skill is a skill that is necessary or desirable for full, whole-hearted participation in everyday life. It helps in meeting the challenges of everyday life.

2. **Gender**

   Gender is a socio-culturally created concept. It is different from ‘sex’. Sex signifies the biological differences between male and female, whereas gender signifies socio culturally acquired characteristics. It is more about being a ‘man’ and a ‘woman’ in the given specific spatio-temporal context.

3. **Feminism**

   Feminism refers to political, cultural, economic movements aimed at establishing greater, equal, or among a minority, superior rights and participation in society for women and girls. Feminism draws heavily from Marxism.

4. **Globalisation**

   Globalisation is a worldwide movement toward economic, financial, trade and communication integration. Globalisation implies the opening of local and nationalistic perspectives to a broader outlook of an interconnected and interdependent world with free transfer and capital, goods and services across national frontiers.

   As an impact of globalisation, Indian economy is growing fast and is becoming globally competitive. At the individual level, it has kindled ambition and aspirations of young Indians.
5. Socio-cultural spaces

'Space' is an important notion in the paradigm of social research and especially qualitative research. People have moved beyond the passive concept of social space as just a 'backdrop' or a passive background. To quote Aaron M. Kuntz,

"Against such a definition, one might understand space as contributing to meaning-making and as itself produced."

Obviously, in this meaning making and creation of space, endeavour, our perception becomes the key factor. In other words the social space is constructed through our specific perceptions. E. g. the space at temple becomes sacred due to our humble attitude.

6. Lens or Perspective

The positionality of the research participant is a key factor in the outcomes of research. Lens or the perspective of the research participants signifies the culture specific positionality of the participants.

7. Culturology and Philosophy

Theodore Brameld, keeping in tune with postmodern climate, views philosophy as 'culture's' awareness about itself. In the present study, philosophisation is undertaken from this perspective.

A few methodological concepts and constructs will be discussed in the next section.

To sum up, we shall be analysing the research findings in the context of framework of the above mentioned concepts.

• Review of Literature

Since the project is positioned in the post-modernistic Philosophy, it has relied on many other branches of knowledge, like Sociology, Psychology, Gender studies Feminism, Research and Methodology and Philosophy. Various books, websites and encyclopaedia are referred to in this context, which helped in arriving at the conceptual clarity, framing the issues and analysis of the results. A few books referred have been listed in the reference section.

Out of these, the encyclopaedia helped in paving the backdrop. बदलत्वा विनिर्मिता helped in framing the questionnaire. For research methodology and analysis, the present project has levied very heavily on S. Pandya's book. With this conceptual framework now let us turn towards the actual survey.

Actual Survey (conducted in Mixed Method Mode)

• Mixed Method Mode

Mixed method mode was followed in the present project, whereby qualitative and quantitative models are blended, in which pragmatic philosophical thinking is complemented with survey method of data collection. This an in depth approach of qualitative research is coupled with the number oriented quantitative approach.

Moreover, for data representation and data analysis, the method of narrative inquiry is chiefly undertaken. The narrative representation of the questionnaire based survey and its content analysis reads as follows:

1. The Research participants

25 women across the age of 40 to 84 from Mumbai and Thane participated in the research. They all hailed from middle or higher middle socio-economic class. The sample was randomly selected. No special reference to caste, class, religion or political ideology was taken into consideration. They were enthusiastic about the project and quite a few commented positively about taking up this project. All the women were well placed and socially active. All women (except one) were Marathi speaking people.

2. The Questionnaire

For demographic details, the questionnaire consisted of 8 items. Mainly focusing on the 3 dimensions about life skills, viz.:

1. Life skills that were emphasized by their families of origin (for women or girls)

2. Life skills that they think are necessary and important today, as well as for generations to come (for women)

3. Whether earning money is an important or the most important skill for women

The questionnaire ended with the column of comments, in which a few participants have made significant comments.

• Narrative Analysis and Discussion

In a constantly changing environment having life skills is an essential part of being able to meet the challenges of everyday life:

• Focus and self-control

• Having connections

• Critical thinking is regarded as a fundamental life skill. Desirable life skills change from culture to culture and from time to time. Their desirability also changes from society to society.

As stated in the earlier section, we shall be undertaking research
### Life Skills Emphasized by Families of Origin for Women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sr. No.</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Life Skills Emphasized by Families of Origin, for Women</th>
<th>Life Skills Participants Felt to be Important Today or in Future</th>
<th>Earning Money</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1       | 80 and above | - Cooking  
- Humility  
- Dignity of labour  
- Obedience  
- Respect for elders  
- submission | - Culinary art  
- Hospitality  
- Adjustment  
- Dealing with life as it comes | Important, but not most important |
| 2       | 70 to 80  | - Cooking  
- Education  
- Skills in knitting, stitching, etc.  
- Being feminine  
- Obedience  
- Respect for elders  
- Managing relations  
- Humility | - Education  
- Cooking  
- Learning self-defence techniques  
- Being happy  
- Financial independence  
- Respect for others  
- Self-control | Important |
| 3       | 60 to 70  | - Education  
- Cooking  
- Problem solving  
- Being creative  
- Respecting elders  
- Household work  
- Helping others  
- Obedience  
- Politeness  
- Child rearing  
- Creativity  
- Sportsman spirit  
- Inter-personal skills  
- Cooking  
- Creativity  
- Confidence  
- Professional efficiency  
- Focus  
- Positivity  
- Being independent | - Means but not the end  
- Only if money is required to support family | Important to become independent |
| 4       | 50 to 60  | - Cooking  
- Obedience  
- Multitasking  
- Self sufficiency  
- Adjustment  
- Child rearing  
- Education  
- Planning  
- Humanity  
- Punctuality  
- Neatness  
- Simplicity  
- Consistency | - Hard work  
- Patience  
- Respect for other women  
- Mastering emotions  
- Humidity  
- Having vision  
- Contributing for the betterment of society  
- Smartness  
- Neatness | Important |
| 5       | 40 to 50  | - Household work  
- Child rearing  
- Education  
- Managing relations  
- Being independent  
- Following social decorum  
- Following time schedules  
- Cooking  
- Balancing work-life  
- Being self-sufficient (economically) | - Education  
- Assertiveness  
- Adaptability  
- Taking care of family  
- Cultivating our own interests  
- Liking ourselves  
- Self-reliance  
- Effective communication  
- Giving space to family members  
- Confidence  
- Positivity  
- Managing good relations  
- Household work  
- Reading  
- Decision making | Important |

#### 1. Life Skills Emphasized by the Families of Origin, for Women

Very interesting and varied responses were fetched in this column. Even grannies who have crossed eighty told that education was given maximum importance in their houses. A few life skills mentioned by the participants could be seen in the table given above.

However, the most common skill emphasised was the skills of cooking. Two responses in this context are worth comment. One principal (63) and one eminent doctor (73), narrated that in their family upbringing, 'cooking' was never emphasised. But later on in life, they have repented for not learning cooking. And they have earnestly advised the young generation not to neglect this skill. Education, cooking, house making and maintaining relations have been perceived as the most important virtues or life skills from the earlier generations irrespective of age factor.

#### 2. Life Skills Which Participants Felt to be Important Today or In the Future

Almost all the answers were repeated in this column. People working outside home emphasized multitasking, emotional management, yoga, fitness, etc. to be very important along with education, cooking and child rearing.

One response worth special comment is that girls or women must learn 'self-defence' which will make them more confident while moving in the public space.

Again, even in this column cooking and housekeeping appeared to be the most commonly narrated skills.

#### 3. Earning Money

But for one participant, everybody felt that earning money, to be self-sufficient is the most basic and important life skill today. However, how much money is important, when and how one should earn money, that has to be decided by each individual.

We would humbly like to note here that the column about gendered phrases and idioms like, ‘जिचे हुँती पाढ़णारी टोची, ती जागे वाढणारी’ was not properly understood by the participants and hence we are not commenting and narrating about it in the present research.

#### Interpretation

After the advent of globalisation and changed economic policies in 1990s, the middle class’s economic aspirations have hiked considerably. This era
of reforms also ushered in a remarkable change in the Indian mindset. It has imbued the value of fast trade prosperity. In this class women were also there. They slowly and gradually started perceiving their work not only as jobs (complementing the main income of the house) but as prospering careers. Many new vistas were open. Education, being self-sufficient and independence were becoming almost mandatory skills in the middle class families.

In this context I am reminded of one comment by Durgabai Bhagvat, the great Marathi Research Scholar and writer. She commented that 'going to school or not' was a matter of choice for girls but looking after younger siblings and helping mothers in household jobs was almost compulsory for every girl. At the age of 11, it was mandatory for every girl to be equipped with skills, which would help her to feed at least 4 to 6 people. That was regarded as the test of her upbringing.

Not only this, with the economic changes even small and subtle social changes occurred in the middle class. The marriageable age increased. Eating outside was no more considered to be a taboo. Dressing style of girls became convenient. Smoking, drinking also became 'in' things in a particular social class.

All these changes were also reflected in the field of academics. Considerable amount of research was done in the feminist paradigm. 'Gender equality', 'women's empowerment' became the buzz words and they continue to be so. The patriarchal pattern of marriage and family was questioned in many ways. 'Gender equality was at least legally sought at workplaces. As a result of all these changes women are considerably empowered today. Of course we are making this statement with reference to the middle class and higher middle class alone, accepting the demerit of overgeneralization.

Against this background, the importance given to cooking by all respondents amused us as researchers and we genuinely felt that this calls our attention for further research and philosophization. Culture is a dynamic concept. Women's role in the society has considerably changed today. However, in spite of that, young, old, careerist, house makers, highly qualified, mediocre, all seem to give considerable importance to cooking (followed by house making) as a life skill.

This raises various questions, such as:

- Is the perception of life skills by women even today coloured by patriarchal, male oriented expectations?
- To be feminine is to be the provider. Maybe this natural role of female species is cutting all the cultural edges and making her intuitively feel that yesss...! To cook and feed is my special privilege. To talk in a

Jungian way is it a feminine archetype working through her mind, which is unconsciously directing her to give importance to 'cooking' as a life skill?

- The cultural space generated through this activity and encoded in the age old famous saying "way to heart goes through stomach" – Is it near and dear to a woman?

In this context we are also reminded of a story about a woman Zen guru. Zen in the context of the story refers to the subtle moment of "Self-Realization". It is said that the aforesaid lady Zen Guru got her "Zen" ("Self-Realization"), when she was intently looking at rice which was being cooked. Thus she was liberated. This was quite unlike her great guru Gautama, who received "Zen" in meditation. What does this speaks of?

We believe that we definitely need to take a fresh look at this response and value a woman's perception of this unique socio-cultural space created by her for herself in the family, or even besides the family. We need to listen carefully to this unique voice of women and narrate it afresh in the changing cultural scenario.

To narrate one more casual supporting observation, in public spaces today, recipes are exchanged so regularly amongst women, be it train, bus, workplace, phone, WhatsApp or the internet. Do men exchange recipes like this?

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The present research is a small project. We are aware of its limitations. Adhering strictly to the postmodernist spirit, we are not drawing any conclusions in the terms of 'the truths'. We don't wish to claim any generalisation about the perception of cooking as an important life skill. Women respondents have unconsciously considered it to be important, we don't wish to establish any generalisation like "all women...", but humbly narrate what we have observed in our small research project.

However the project definitely indicates the research potential of this topic. Quite a few respondents suggested having similar research with male counterparts. A few of them commented on the threat of the 'superwoman syndrome' but everybody felt that we may balance the chores in a little smart way but women have to learn, master and do cooking. The dimension of age can also be a vital predictor in this respect. A very young lot of women may reveal very different priorities of life skills - the younger lot which is precisely the product of globalisation. However in our small study with all the constrictions and with random sample, whatever observations we made, are being noted in this paper.

We would like to quote here from the book Janani which brings out the Inner
deeper meaning of this most fundamental life skill of a woman.

"माझी आई - शीर आणि तेजस्वी
अंगावरे दागिने आणि चैंपियन्स रोज दीसरास असेल,
शाही वर राज्य केले तिने
भी एका कोणाच्या तब्बल, आयुष्यात पहला होते
कोणतेही तिथिया सर्वरक्षकांक्रिया निवडी सुदृंढी केली
आणि तुम्हाला तात्काळिक प्रशंसा केली"

(Rough Translation:
My mother - great and glorious
Graceful Ornaments on her flesh and smile on face
She ruled on everyone
I was standing in a corner and looking intensely
Someone appreciated her cooking and culinary skills)

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