
Finding Agency: Nurturing Empowerment and Amplifying Voices

Antara Kamlay

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Philosophy, Chatra Ramai Pandit Mahavidyalaya, Chatra, Darapur, Bankura, Pin -722141, West Bengal, India; Email: antarakamlay18@gmail.com

Abstract

Finding Agency: Nurturing Empowerment and Amplifying Voices" explores the multifaceted concept of agency within diverse societal contexts. In a world marked by varying power dynamics, social structures, and cultural norms, individuals strive to assert their autonomy, shape their identities, and influence their environments. This paper delves into the ways in which agency is cultivated, nurtured, and expressed, highlighting the pivotal role of empowerment and the amplification of voices. Drawing from interdisciplinary perspectives, including psychology, sociology, and critical theory, it examines the interplay between personal agency and external forces, such as institutional barriers, systemic inequalities, and cultural expectations. Moreover, the study investigates strategies for fostering agency at both individual and collective levels, emphasizing the importance of inclusive practices, participatory decision-making, and advocacy for marginalized communities. Through illuminating case studies and theoretical analyses, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of agency as a dynamic process of self-determination and social change.

KEYWORDS: Agency, Empowerment, Voice, Autonomy, Identity, Social Change, Power Dynamics, Societal Context, Inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

Empowerment is a multifaceted concept that encompasses various dimensions of human existence, ranging from individual to collective levels. At its core, empowerment involves the enhancement of one's capabilities, confidence, and autonomy to effectively navigate and influence their circumstances. Empowerment is the journey where individuals or collectives acquire the power, means, and chances to make significant decisions and enact actions that bring about positive changes in their own lives and those of others.

One of the fundamental aspects of empowerment is the recognition and assertion of rights. This involves acknowledging and advocating for the rights inherent to all individuals, such as the right to freedom, equality, dignity, and self-determination. Empowerment entails not only understanding these rights but also actively exercising and defending them, whether in personal relationships, communities, or broader societal contexts.

Education plays a pivotal role in empowerment by equipping individuals with knowledge, skills, and critical thinking abilities necessary to navigate complex social,

economic, and political landscapes. Access to quality education empowers individuals to challenge stereotypes, overcome barriers, and pursue opportunities that align with their aspirations and values. Moreover, education fosters a sense of agency by enabling individuals to articulate their needs, advocate for their interests, and participate meaningfully in decision-making processes.

Economic empowerment is another crucial dimension, particularly in the context of marginalized or disadvantaged groups. Access to financial resources, employment opportunities, and entrepreneurship initiatives can empower individuals to break free from cycles of poverty, dependency, and exploitation. Economic empowerment not only enhances individuals' material well-being but also fosters a sense of self-reliance, confidence, and dignity.

Empowerment is also closely linked to social and political participation. By engaging in civic activities, advocacy campaigns, and community initiatives, individuals can amplify their voices, influence policies, and contribute to positive social change.

EMPOWERMENT AND VOICE ACCORDING TO GILLIGAN

In philosophy, it is true that both mainstream thinkers and feminist thinkers pursue justice. However, they differ in their logical criteria and the styles of the presentation. In the perspective of feminist thinkers, patriarchal laws that are indifferent have been deemed responsible for social injustice. If we aim to eliminate these circumstances, we must abolish the concepts of injustice and inequality present in our society. Mainstream thinkers and feminist thinkers differ in their approaches to implementing justice. Mainstream thinkers adhere to beliefs in a priori, context-neutral, impersonal, and impartial judgment. Conversely, feminist thinkers advocate for connectivity, relationality, and situatedness, which lead to a more nuanced understanding of justice. According to them, universal and impartial judgments erase differences. For feminists, if we neither recognize differences nor explain the individuality of a person, then we cannot make proper judgments. Justice theories that rely on universality, impartiality, and individuality cannot abolish discrimination, oppression, and ignominy in women's lives. Feminist thinkers believe that every human life has a context and lived experience. These experiences help to claim justice. If we do not consider the person's context, then that person's voice is distorted, suppressed, and silenced.

In the 1980s, during the second wave of the feminist movement, feminist thinkers recognized the need to develop a new theoretical approach to address the issues in women's lives. Carol Gilligan, the founder of Care Ethics, established a new school of ethics complementary to mainstream ethics.

In this article, I want to focus on the highly popular book *In A Different Voice* written by Carol Gilligan. In her research, Gilligan demonstrates that women develop a distinct moral voice when faced with dilemmas, contrasting with men. She observed that from early childhood, women tend to prioritize relationality and connectivity over separateness, believing these elements contribute to sound moral judgment. Gilligan argues that gender discrimination in moral perspectives stems from various forms of self-construction. A disparity exists between mainstream ethics and feminist ethics, with the former emphasizing justice while the latter prioritizes goodness, beneficence, and utility. Gilligan delineates care ethics as a unique perspective in this regard. According to her, ethics is not merely an analysis of right and wrong judgments of an action. Ethics play an important role in manifesting the truth of the world and in removing injustice from our society.

Carol Gilligan's book "In a Different Voice" establishes the concept of personhood based on care. Gilligan's research extends beyond women's lives, revealing two distinct yet non-contradictory ways of approaching moral problems. One perspective is intertwined with men, while the other is linked with the community of women. Gilligan suggests that the presence of relationships can contribute to personality development, elevating ethical values such as care, connection, and interdependency.

Gilligan argues that traditional ethical theories, predominantly shaped by male perspectives, often overlook the moral voices and experiences of women. She proposes that women tend to approach moral dilemmas differently from men, prioritizing caring, relationships, and interconnectedness. This perspective, termed the "ethic of care," emphasizes empathy, compassion, and the nuanced understanding of specific situations and individual needs.

It's important to note that Gilligan's work does not suggest that men are incapable of caring or that women are universally caring. Rather, she contends that diverse perspectives contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of ethics. Gilligan's insights have significantly influenced feminist ethics, sparking discussions about morality, care, and gender across various disciplines.

Gilligan's views diverged from traditional moral theories, such as those proposed by Lawrence Kohlberg, which focused heavily on abstract principles and rules.

Gilligan argued that traditional moral theories, which emphasize principles like justice and rights, often overlook the importance of caring relationships and emotional connections in moral decision-making. She suggested that women, in

particular, tend to approach moral dilemmas with a greater emphasis on empathy, compassion, and maintaining relationships.

According to Gilligan, moral decisions are not solely determined by universal rules or principles; instead, they are influenced by personal experiences, relationships, and the particular context of each situation. She emphasized the importance of considering individual perspectives and the interconnectedness of people in making moral judgments.

She suggested that individuals should integrate their caring sentiments with an understanding of others within society. Gilligan proposed that moral agents cannot simply adhere to predetermined rules; rather, decisions should be guided by care, emotion, and recognition of interdependence. This approach, she believed, could foster sustainable development and benefit all individuals in society.

In 1980, Gilligan advocated for care ethics and analysed that in our patriarchal society, there exists another voice alongside the patriarchal one, referred to as the 'different voice.' Voice serves as a means of expressing opinions. Gilligan employed the term 'voice' in two distinct ways: as a description and as a metaphor. These dual meanings contribute to the establishment and preservation of relationships and interdependence. In 1993, Gilligan reiterated her ideas in the first chapter, titled 'Letter to Readers,' in her book *In a Different Voice*.

I say that by voice I mean something like what people mean when they speak of the core of the self. Voice is natural and also cultural. It is composed of breath and sound, words and rhythm and language.¹ (Gilligan, 1992, p. xvi)

Gilligan acknowledged that when she researched women's moral values, she encountered some problems because in a patriarchal society, 'difference' is often perceived as 'deviance'. It is believed that women do not express their voices in mainstream terms, rendering them vulnerable and powerless.

In her book, Gilligan argues that 'difference' is not necessarily perceived as 'deviance' or powerlessness. According to Gilligan, a 'different voice' is instead seen as a communicative or interdependent voice capable of expressing a person's lived experience. (Gilligan, 1992, p. xviii)

In her book "Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development," Gilligan uncovers the concept of an individual voice in a chapter titled 'Harmonics of Relationships'. Beginning their research in 1986-1990 with 18 years of

¹Carol Gilligan, 'Letter to Readers 1993' in, *In a Different Voice*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1992, p. xvi.

data from Loreal School girls in Cleveland, Gilligan and her colleagues discovered that participants in their meetings expressed their feelings with distinct individual voices. These individuals lived experiences and voices showcased diversity, reflecting various relationships. This phenomenon came to be known as the 'different voice'. Gilligan asserts that this type of voice shapes women's personalities. (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 12)

Gilligan acknowledged that women's breath and vocal expression ground the experience, demonstrating that voice possesses an ethical central orientation. Voice serves as a mediator for internal psychological feelings, thriving in external relationships within the world. These relationships, stemming from both self and others, enable communication. Voice possesses resonance and vibration, capable of unveiling greater truths. In other words, voice can forge a connection between body, psyche, and culture. Language serves as the manifestation of voice, binding psyche and culture together. The relational connection of voice is such that any change in this dynamic is reflected in its resonance. (Gilligan, 1992, p. xiii)

Voice generally refers to the speaker's communication tool, which helps convey his or her life story, point of view, and even emotional state. Gilligan proved in her text that women have two types of voices: i) internalized voice, and ii) inner voice. When women start to uphold patriarchal values and positions, then we have to consider that women's voice is internalized. This internalized voice is institutional and articulated in a gender-biased manner. On the other hand, when a woman rejects patriarchal values and positions that means she is speaking with her inner voice. It is her original or natural voice, which rejects patriarchal gender roles and upholds the lived experience of a person. This inner voice manifests the pain, joy, and thoughts of a person. Proper ethical judgment is not possible without the natural voice. Gilligan asserts that in order to comprehend voice psychology, one must delve into intrinsic elements such as breath and language, psychological emotions and cognition, cultural context, and the forms of life. When this type of voice becomes distorted, the natural voice fails to resonate authentically. This perspective on voice only finds resonance when it can uphold the real voice. Consequently, listeners bear a significant responsibility in capturing the real voice and manifesting the speaker's lived experiences.

A person's voice is not merely the expression of breath, words, understanding, psychological thought, and language; rather, it encompasses all of these elements. Therefore, listeners assign importance to three key elements when they hear any type of voice. Simultaneously, listeners must comprehend the distinction between the natural and constructed voices of speakers (both men and women).

To understand this complexity of voice, one must grasp the following:

- How voice interacts with body language.
- How voice interacts with language.
- How voice interacts with psychological feelings.
- How voice interacts with relationships.

HOW VOICE INTERACTS WITH BODY LANGUAGE

Psychologist Carol Gilligan argues that a person's voice reflects their thoughts through her theory of noise. Voice can manifest through a person's body language and behaviour. Gilligan presents voice in a broad sense, wherein silence also carries its own voice. According to Gilligan, when one chooses to remain silent, they are not participating in the situation. Thus, silence becomes a manifestation of psychological feelings, though it is not audible in the conventional sense because it lacks breath and words. However, its presence can still be felt.

HOW VOICE INTERACTS WITH LANGUAGE

Voice is manifested through language. When voice interacts with language, the body and mind begin to reciprocate with each other. When language becomes gender-biased, men tend to manifest reason in their language, while women tend to manifest their language through emotion. Gender-biased language can provoke listeners to make partial judgments as they analyse the voice. When a judge hears the voice of the prosecution, they may be conscious of whether the language manifested is gender-biased or not. This awareness arises because gender-biased language has the potential to obliterate the true essence of a person, leaving one woman's lived experiences, pain, and distress remain silenced.

HOW VOICE INTERACTS WITH PSYCHOLOGICAL FEELINGS

Voice is a blend of both physical and psychological elements. When an individual speaks, their psychological state is often reflected in their voice. When someone speaks with their internalized voice, such as a patriarchal voice, their true essence may not be fully expressed. When individuals, regardless of gender, embrace their inner voice, they embody agency in voice acquisition. According to Gilligan, acquiring agency implies gaining autonomy, thereby empowering individuals to express their inner voice freely. Consequently, for a judge, discerning whether a voice is agentic or not poses a challenge. An agentic voice reflects one's core beliefs, while a non-agentic voice often reveals internalized conflicts.

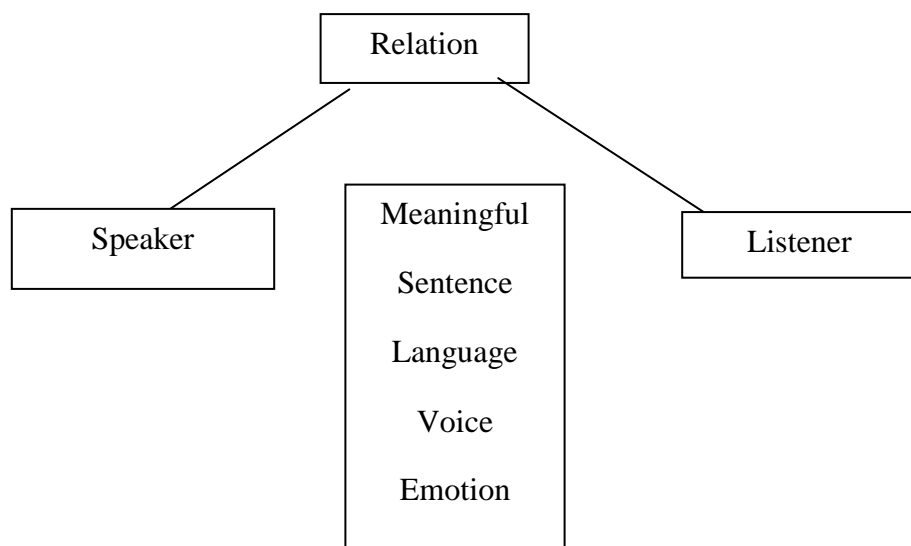
HOW VOICE INTERACTS WITH RELATIONSHIP

The voice, naturally communicative, aims to be audible, serving as a mediator that bridges the distance between the inner and outer worlds. It interacts within

relationships, attempting to convey the psychological and cultural position of the speaker to the listener. Voice embodies not merely words but also an agent and personality. Where there is a voice, there is a person.

Philosopher disagree with the matter of is a listener and audience part of a linguistic usage? Linguistic Noam Chomsky argues that listening is nothing to do with language. Although Jean Paul Sarte, Simone de Beauvoir and Carol Gilligan think that it is not important that person's voice always have any recipient. They accepted the hypothesis of language exchange is like

Relationship between Speaker and Listener



Language is a psychological instrument that can bridge the inner world with the outer. In care ethics, the listener experiences emotions to comprehend the speaker's voice, as this voice is inherent in the concept of justice. Here, Gilligan connects voice and language with physiology, psychology, and culture, topics also discussed by Gottlob Frege in his "laws of thought". Frege describes language within a logical framework. (Frege, 1879-1891, p. 4) On the other hand, Gilligan suggests that the voice is inherent in the emotions and feelings of language, which can establish a bond between the inner and outer worlds.

If one discusses the positions of the speaker and the listener within an ethical framework, it is essential to recognize that the speaker's speech and narrative must be audible to the listener. This is because both the act of 'speaking' and listening entail various complexities for both the speaker and the listener. Language and culture play a crucial role in determining and ensuring what the speaker can convey and how much of it will be comprehended by the listener. W.V. Quine elucidates this

complexity from the perspective of the 'Incommensurability of Translation.'(Moitra, 2002, Feminist Thought) There always exists a challenge of translation between the speaker and the listener, particularly evident when the speaker is a woman and the listener is a man with fundamentally different social and cultural backgrounds, such as a patriarchal context. In such patriarchal contexts, women may strive to maintain their own language, emotions, lived experiences, and gender-sensitive thought processes. Thus, the speaker and listener belong to two different worlds. These differences can be described in two different ways – they belong to different worlds or they differ on the basis of language. If the listener belongs to a different world, then according to Quine, translation is possible. If they have different languages, then translation is also possible. Gilligan pointed out a new fact: when a speaker connects with a certain matter, it will be conveyed to the listener through language and culture. If the listener belongs to a different language and culture, then the situation and psychological structure of the speaker may be misleading.

Empowerment, therefore, according to Gilligan, involves recognizing the validity and importance of this alternative moral perspective. It entails giving voice to women's experiences, emotions, and relational reasoning, and valuing these contributions in shaping ethical principles and decision-making processes.

In essence, Gilligan's concept of empowerment and voice emphasizes the importance of recognizing diverse perspectives, particularly those traditionally marginalized or undervalued, and fostering environments where individuals feel empowered to express themselves authentically, especially in contexts of moral reasoning and decision-making.

CONCLUSION

Gilligan, in her care ethics, proposed that proper judgment is only possible when one can understand the actual lived situation of the listener. In an ethical situation, one must establish a relationship between the judge and the justice candidate, upon which the course of judgment will be determined. The judge immerses themselves in the perspective of the audience, as if passing moral judgment through their own extension of self.

The current discussion sheds light on the hybridity that recent feminist philosophies adopt as normative within the context of patriarchal mainstream thought. However, if freedom is to be regarded as an important element in determining moral principles, then the analogical possibilities of conventional moral forms must be

reconsidered. With this goal in mind, the ethical expectations described by Gilligan are analysed in the present article as alternative embodiments of ideals.

Recently, multiculturalism, freedom of choice, plurality of moral voices, heterogeneity of human needs, context sensitivity, multidimensional ethical thought, and situated reason—all represent unique forms of free thought that hold significant importance.

Now is the time to address the root causes of social inequality and the disparities that stem from discrimination based on sex, class, and race. Differences often lead to discrimination, fostering resentment and disrupting our peaceful coexistence. Embracing diversity and intersectionality is essential for the healthy and enhanced survival of humanity.

When diversity is disregarded, and individuals are unable to meet the multifaceted needs of others, choices become limited. In such circumstances, emotional well-being and cultural freedom remain mere ethical aspirations. A person's rationality and liberty are compromised when society neglects the needs and priorities of communities, imposing the rules of a select few.

For instance, mainstream perspectives often overlook the rights and distinctions of homosexual individuals, treating them no differently than heterosexual individuals. In response, empowerment opportunities and amplifying their voices become crucial avenues for advocating for their rights and needs.

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