RESEARCH METHODOLOGY THROUGH THE FEMINIST LENS :
THE CASE FOR
THE WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES AND THE BOTTOM-UP APPROACH

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Abstract : The present paper attempts to discuss the significance of research methodology in the context of research, clearly highlighting its essential features while distinguishing between the two popular strands, namely, the qualitative and the quantitative methodological approaches. Further, the paper tries to explore the specificities of feminist research, and justifies the adoption of a qualitative methodological approach in the perspective of feminist research problems, particularly in the case of development interventionist strategies and programmes affecting female participant-cum-beneficiaries. Based on literature survey, the major thrust is to explore and establish the significance of a 'bottom-up' qualitative, practical, pluralist approach to feminist research design, instead of a 'top-down', quantitative, theoretical, generalized/unified research approach, in order to enable the female agents to represent their lived experiences, perceptions, feelings, and enable the researcher, to capture the silenced voices of the subjugated while recognizing their role as knowledge producers. The focus is essentially on women's perspectives, including their experiences as important data sources, for identifying the constraints faced, power dynamics experienced, as participants in social programmes and processes, based on experiential evidence and contextualization.

KEY WORDS : feminist research, qualitative analysis, experiential evidence, situated knowledge, women's standpoints, plurality.

I. INTRODUCTION

Research, normally associated with, academic investigation, is commonly perceived as, a pursuit for new knowledge, a search for newer ideas, facts, and theories, and an adventurous journey, into the unknown terrains of knowledge, with respect to a particular discipline. Such a journey aims at, unraveling unknown truths, through systematic investigation based on textual, empirical, or experiential evidence, guided by scientific principles and procedures. Moreover, there are various steps involved, in research, from problem identification to definition of objectives, framing research questions, choice of methodological approaches, data collection, data representation, analysis, drawing inferences and deriving conclusions.

There can be various types of research, ranging from, empirical research, theoretical research, exploratory research, explanatory research, comparative research, decision oriented research, action research, and policy oriented research.

Research involves proper planning, and choice of appropriate research methodology. Further, depending on the nature of the problem, the researcher can adopt a quantitative or qualitative approach. Social research, attempts to explore, investigate, observe, identify cause-effect relationships, in the context of, social phenomena, social action, social activity, social groups, institutions and organizations, and social agents and their behaviour.

Feminist research, acquires a multi-disciplinary approach and adopts a feminist research methodology with its own characteristic features. A humble attempt has been made in the paper, to explore the specificities of feminist research and establish, the choice of qualitative approach, based on experiential evidence, to capture the actualities in the context of women's experiences, as they participate in various developmental programmes and processes, and the extent to which, they are exposed to subjugation and gender imbalances.

Conclusions are arrived at, and inferences drawn, regarding the superiority of experiential evidence, on the basis of literature survey, and textual analysis. The variety in women's experiences, generates multiple standpoints, justifying in turn, the dependence on a pluralistic approach. The disadvantaged, marginalized women's, advantageous position as a knowledge producer is acknowledged, and her first-hand accounts of the lived experiences, untainted by third party interpretations, is considered to be a rich source of information in feminist research. It is derived that, by giving voices to the under-privileged, the issue of the

moral obligation of the researcher and their social commitment is addressed to a considerable extent, satisfying a major requirement of true feminist research.

The paper has been structured in the following manner : **Section-I** introduces the notions of research, research types, research methods and techniques, research methodology and its significance in research, while clearly highlighting the essential differences between, quantitative and qualitative research approaches. The following section, **Section-II**, concentrates on the distinguishing features of feminist research, focuses on the specificities of feminist research methodologies, in particular, attempting to establish the role of qualitative research approach in the domain of feminist studies, and acknowledges the relevance of women's lived experiences, recognizing the advantageous position of marginalized social agents as knowledge-providers. **Section-III**, the concluding section, comprehensively portrays the summary of the analysis.

II. SECTION-I

Literature survey reveals that research is an attempt towards a logical and systematic search for relatively new and useful information, and a process of unearthing hidden truths and newer dimensions related to a particular issue. The information might be collected from different sources like books, journals, nature, personal experience of social agents etc. Research, a systematic process of scientific inquiry, is done with the help of various techniques like rigorous study, experimentation, observation, analysis, comparison, reasoning, to arrive at valuable conclusions on the basis of inferences drawn. The ultimate aim of such scientific inquiry, is probing to discover newer facts and cause-effect relationships, generating unique interpretations, or revising established facts, events, behaviour patterns, and theories. Thus proper research broadens the horizon of knowledge, introducing newer concepts, perceptions, outlook, explanations, unfolding alternative visions and perspectives, popularizing newer paradigms. (S. Rajasekar, P. Philominathan, V. Chinnathambi, 2013).

Research can be associated with an academic investigation, and systematic exploration of information, which helps the researcher to define and frame, a research problem, subsequently paving the way for collecting the relevant information, managing the data so obtained, understanding the emerging themes, organizing the data for further analysis, so as to define or test hypotheses, solve problems, suggest solutions, or arrive at conclusions through data evaluations. The final conclusions can range from solutions to specific problems, or formulations of theoretical approaches, based on generalizations. As inferred from literature survey, research can be library-based, laboratory-based, field-based, or simulation approach based.[1]

There are various types of research, depending on the prime focus and the approach adopted, namely exploratory, explanatory, action, comparative, theoretical and, empirical research. Moreover, as discussed by S. Rajasekar, P. Philominathan, V. Chinnathambi (2013), research, can be broadly categorized as, basic research and, applied research, with the former marked by generalizations, and the latter, concentrating on specificities.

Research in pure sciences normally concentrates on natural phenomena, or natural laws and events, whereas, social science research concentrates on social phenomena, norms, customs, activities, social relations, social constraints, etc.

Research can also be distinguished as quantitative or qualitative research. Again, as observed, quantitative research, is based on the quantitative measurement of specific characteristics and is justified in case of research problems dealing with quantifiable variables and characteristics. On the other hand, qualitative research, deals with qualitative phenomena, with a primary focus on motivational research, attitude or opinion research, human behavioural research, concentrating on characteristics which are not quantifiable, or readily measurable. Therefore it can be inferred that, while quantitative research enquires about 'how many', 'how much', 'how frequently', or the extent or degree of impact of a phenomenon, qualitative research tries to elaborate on the 'what', 'how', 'why' of a phenomenon. The latter deals with the perceptions, attitudes, preferences, beliefs, behaviour patterns, of social agents, and subjects of study, while the former deals with quantifiable characteristics like, income, profit, sales, costs, temperature, pressure, density, weight, viscosity, elasticity, and other dimensions and variables with numerical values.

In this background it can be argued that, while the quantitative approach, involves quantitative data generation, followed by a rigorous, formal, quantitative analysis, the qualitative approach, is focused on subjective view points and insights which are considered to be valuable factors shaping the research findings. Here the data generation is of the non-quantitative form, and hence there is no room for rigorous quantitative analysis. Rather, it is based on participatory tools like, interviews, group discussions, life histories, case studies, and narratives to get an essence of the subjects lived experiences.[2]

The qualitative approach can be strongly justified, in the context of research problems, where the area is relatively unexplored, unchartered, undisclosed, and new, and the research field involves multiple stakeholders, with varied interests being represented both from the demand as well as the supply side. For example, in the context of developmental programmes, based on microfinancial interventions, the major players in the supply side, are, the Government/State, NGOs, Financial Institutions, Bankers, Trainers, Community Resource Persons. Whereas, the demand side is represented by, the marginalized sections, comprising of the SHG members, group-leaders, cluster and federation leaders and members, generating a diverse landscape of stakeholders with varied interests. In this context, the opportunity for intensive fieldwork is rich, and extensive in such a diverse setting, and may throw up, new and unexpected data, particularly in remote and inaccessible areas, in a completely different social background as compared to that of the researcher. Here qualitative research gives the opportunity to make adventurous journeys,

with the help of qualitative techniques, like personal/group interviews and focused group discussions, to unearth perspectives and hidden experiences of relevant social agents. Qualitative approach, with a special emphasis on in-depth interviews, FGDs, and case studies, can better address issues of heterogeneity and diversity, with FGDs helping to understand the group dynamics, and also bringing to the fore or capturing the voices of the under-represented. On the other hand, in-depth individual interviews help in revealing hidden domination-subordination relationships among group members, which may not always get revealed in group interviews. Qualitative approach has a strong justification in the case of feminist research where the experiences, perceptions, emotions, of the marginalised and discriminated agents are the prime areas of focus, which can be revealed by creating space for the marginalized to express their views by breaking the silence.

As per the perception of M. N. Srinivas, A. N. Shah, E. A. Ramaswamy (2002), field work being a personal experience, developed on the basis of close interaction with the subjects, enables the researcher to arrive at his/her own set of equations with his/her informants. For best possible results, the field worker is expected to allow the field to take over, so as to generate actual realities in the form of information. The developments in the field should guide the course of investigation or research enquiry. The tendency to go to the field loaded with information from secondary sources, and biases of one's own discipline is to be minimized. It is also highlighted that there should be ample flexibility to change if necessary, the focus and the perspectives of research consequent to unexpected field results.

According to Jennifer Platt (2002), 'interview' as a methodological practice, has a history of its own, changing overtime in its forms and purposes, and also in terms of the appropriate social relations between the researcher and the respondent, and as observed by the author, there has always been a considerable gap between, the 'prescriptive literature' and the 'current practice' of interview. This is more because, in actual practice, there is bound to be deviations in approach, from the normative theoretical constructions regarding structuring of interviews, to bring out the most or the best from the respondents. In fact, the popularity of interview as an information generation technique, lies in its flexibility, which is required to deal with a varying situation, which restricts the use of specified or standardized stimulus or questions based on prescribed theoretical constructs.

Further it has been argued that, even though the interviewee may be considered as an important information provider , or a key informant, his/her position, in research is not just limited to the role of a respondent in a given sample, supplying factual matters, but more as a "living source", a part of the, phenomenon being investigated, or process being studied, revealing their individual or shared experiences, and accounts of events, along with their relations with the larger societal set-up, reflecting both their personal experiences, social attitudes, their sentiments and emotions, included in the expressed opinion, while enabling, discovery of, plausible social patterns.(Jennifer Platt 2002).

The notions of research methodology, methods and, techniques, occupy an important place in any type of research. According to Harding (1987a),[3] research method, deals with evidence gathering techniques, whereas research methodology, is based on theory and analysis of how research is to be carried out.

Research methods cover all possible techniques used by the researcher from data collection, data organization, analysis involving cause-effect relationships, and verification or ascertaining accuracy of the data as considered by Michael Quinn Patton and Michael Cochran, (2002).

While research methods help to define and construct techniques that are essentially required in solving the research problem, research techniques are various tools and approaches used to gather relevant information, restore and record it, present the same, identify important cause-effect relationships, evaluate outcomes, interpret and verify results. Some of the common research techniques used are, tape recording, photographic techniques, audio visual techniques, recording of interactions, note taking, use of socio-metric and behavioural scales, score cards, interview schedules, FGD guides, cross sectional survey techniques, time series data collection, etc. The relevant methods range from, documental and historical record analysis, interactions with and observations on research subjects, opinionnaire, personal interview, focused group interviews and discussions, telephonic surveys, informal discussions, and questionnaires, etc.

Research methodology, however, is a more holistic and comprehensive concept, which includes, research methods and techniques relevant to the research problem, and also the justification and logic behind the chosen technique, so as to clearly project the essential steps involved in research in a sequential manner, and allow critical scrutiny. It also portrays a brief outline of the steps involved sequentially from problem framing, to literature review (both related to concepts and existing research), the research design, sampling tree, data collection and presentation, analysis and interpretation, arriving at conclusions, and summarizing finding. Thus research methodology, delineates the research process, and generates the relevant methods, which consequently defines the appropriate research techniques to be employed.

Another very significant consideration, in any type of research is to organize the various stages of research work in a sequential manner, and arrange the different phases accordingly. This helps in generating a systematic approach, and adoption of a well developed plan of action. In any type of research, the most important part is to sincerely plan the various stages of research, and define the steps involved sequentially. The plan of action makes the research work compact and ensures better progress. Such a research plan is also a part of research methodology.

At this juncture, it is important to acknowledge and consider the relevance of research methodology. Research methodology, helps in justifying the purpose behind choosing a particular research problem, defining the steps involved and the approach adopted in framing the research problem, justifying the choice of indicators and variables, specifying the data collection methods, as also clearly elaborating on the techniques of data analysis applied. Literature survey reflects that, research methods however, concentrate on the different tools and techniques used to solve the problem, and come to a conclusion.[4]

According to Michael Quinn Patton and Michael Cochran, (2002), qualitative research methodology becomes relevant particularly in the case of projects or research work, aiming to understand different aspects of social life, people's experiences, perceptions, attitudes, perspectives, analyse negative and positive impacts of programmes, policies, divergent views, barriers experienced by the subjects, difficulties and problems faced, how they are affected, account of their sufferings, i.e., an essence of the lived experiences or actual realities, of the target groups, participants, beneficiaries, being researched upon.

Again, literature survey further reveals that, qualitative studies describe the diversity of certain cognitions or behaviours, in a population, by means of semi-structured interviews with a small sample of population members. Such studies, can be referred to as "qualitative survey", which analyses, diversity of member characteristics in a population. Quantitative surveys are typically associated with measurement of population characteristics through observation of sample population members, but social interactions or interpersonal communications or inter-group, inter-institutional linkages are not given importance. The focus in such surveys is essentially on numerical distribution of variables. For example, in the context of microfinancial interventions and their impact, quantitative impact indicators are in the form of number of groups, SHG-bank linkages, formed, i.e., the spread, number and volume of loans sanctioned, savings accumulated, income generated, loans repaid, etc. Thus, the focus being on quantitative outcomes, the processual details, the essence of resulting power dynamics is totally missed out from the researcher's gaze.

However, qualitative surveys, aim at accounting for, the diversity of population characteristics and tries to identify, meaningful variations. While quantitative survey is the study of distribution, the qualitative survey is the study of diversity. According to H. Jansen (2010), in open/inductive surveys, the dimensions, categories, aspects, are established or identified, on the basis of the analysis of interview data or transcripts. In the pre-structured deductive survey, the categories, themes, dimensions, are pre-defined, and the analysis simply clarifies, the distribution of those categories in the target population, primarily their diversities. (Harrie Jansen 2010).

Literature review, brings to the fore, the idea that good qualitative research, requires rigorous and reflexive data analysis, based on a combination of both inductive and deductive thematic analysis. The 'inductive-deductive continuum', provides the scope for combining a directed qualitative analysis, based on pre-determined concepts, themes, and theoretical notions, (deductive approach), and a more open approach enabling accommodation of unexpected responses, unusual stories, particularly, 'socially-located' reactions, which are, culture or community specific. While in the former, themes, codes, are pre-defined, or pre-selected, on the basis of available literature, or existing theories, in the inductive approach, themes are generated, open unrestricted coding is adopted, and such studies are emergent in nature. Codes can be particular behaviours, experiences, incidents, specific values, emotions, like sorrow, love, frustrations, and it helps to systematically organize the data, to make it useful for further analysis. Coding also helps in classifying the data set, for systematic comparisons between different parts of the data set, through proper organization of the data. (Nicola K Gale, Gemma Health, Elaine Cameron, Sabina Rashid, Sabi Redwood, 2013).

Though there are several criticisms raised against qualitative research, in terms of small sample size, limitations in the context of generalization, as lacking rigour, and bias, introduced by the researchers own opinion, but the value of qualitative research cannot be denied. This is particularly true with respect to problems which require in-depth analysis of processes, behaviour patterns, attitudes, beliefs, needs, priorities, and lifestyles of subjects being studied. Whenever it is important to analyse the perceptions of the subjects and emphasise their viewpoints, elaborate on their experiences, it is essential to concentrate on qualitative approaches to both identify associated problems, if any, and also to suggest remedial measures as far as possible.

Again it has been highlighted that, qualitative research does not aim to consider statistically representative samples, but tries to concentrate on purposive sampling, preferably using the maximum variation sample strategy. This is mainly with the intention of, capturing diverse variation, and identifying common patterns across the variant categories. As pointed out in the literature (Cochran et al 2002), that even though the focus is not on statistical generalization, but it is important to ensure minimization of sample bias. Regarding the issue of the choice of sample size, in qualitative research, the sample sizes tend to be small, but the process of data collection or information gathering is expected to continue till the point of 'saturation' is reached, i.e., newer dimensions are no longer generated in the information set, and it gets ensured that, all possible sets of information generating agents have been adequately covered (Cochran et al 2002).

According to Jennifer Platt (2002), quantitative approaches, relying on a set of predetermined questions help in the generation of multiple uniform responses, which may appear to be useful in testing the existence or nonexistence of certain hypotheses, where the confines of research are strictly limited, but, for unearthing new patterns, propositions, situations, behaviours, and experiences, in the context of a research field marked with varying realities, the dynamic and flexible qualitative version is considered to play a more appropriate role. It is further observed that, "narrative interviewing", which allows the respondents' perspective to dominate, gives a better revelation of their experiences in an uninterrupted manner.

Gautam Kumar Basu (2002), is of the opinion that, theory is relative in nature and cannot be universal i.e., in case of 'social realities' generalization is not desirable, rather, it is to be derived from or drawn out of 'concrete instances drawn from everyday reality'. The author further notes that, observations of social realities, vary across observers, as a result of, social contexts and locations where they are placed. He also points out that, 'social location' becomes a 'resource' for acquiring objective knowledge. 'Practical exigencies' or 'material realities' are to be drawn out from the local set up to either present or critique the theoretical base used to depict such realities (Basu 2002).

Thus, it can be inferred that if experimental evidence is valued, then quantitative analysis becomes relevant based on detached, objective science, where reality is merely recorded or noted. Whereas, if experiential evidence is considered, then a qualitative approach based on involved observations, interactions, are adopted, and reality is conceived or felt by the researcher. Further, it appears that, mere observation and accounting of social events and processes from outside the social context, may not give a true picture of the ground reality. Such reality can be better captured through qualitative interviews creating a situation, where interviewees, reveal the hidden realities, and share their lived experiences with the researchers, particularly keeping in mind that there must be a non-hierarchical, and non-exploitative relation between the interviewer and interviewee. Further effective probes, help them to open up and come out with unique instances, which would have otherwise remained hidden from public exposure, strongly justifying the dependence on interviewing, and other qualitative approaches to data collection.

II. SECTION-II

Feminist research, as noted by A. Doucet and Mauthner (2005), is characterized by certain special features as campaigned by feminist scholars. For example, such research is to be 'for women', and not simply 'on women'. They are based on unique ways of representing and recording women's experiences based on diversified methodology, including quantitative approaches. Again, they involve broader issues of social change and social justice, and specific political and ethical concerns. Feminist research recognizes that, power differentials between researcher and researched influence knowledge production, and their emphasis on power dilemmas and related tensions, indicate the strong influence of dominant ideologies in shaping perceptions. Further, the critical importance of being reflexive and transparent, about knowledge production and construction, is an important aspect of feminist research. A. Doucet and Mauthner (2005), further elaborates on multiple hierarchies of inequities present in the social system, focusing on the role played by, researchers in 'co-creating data' and subsequently constructing knowledge and recognizing, the role of institutions which shape the systems through which research knowledge is produced, and how the social location of the researcher influences research.

Feminist research practices according to Reinharz (1992),[5] has adopted a pluralist stand, accepting existing practices, as also devising newer approaches, i.e., following a multi-perspectival methodological approach.

According to Hammersley (1992) [6], feminist research should not just aim at the generation or pursuit of new knowledge, but there must be a social concern, or commitment to the achievement of an emancipatory goal from the perspective of the marginalised, and must attempt in influencing societal transformation through the involvement of researchers.

As observed by the authors Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002), though feminist research is based on diverse approaches, but they enjoy certain common moral and political positions.

As further noted by Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002),[7] by the end of the 20th century, feminism referred to theories of male dominance, involving power relations, with a variety of feminist conceptions of power, a variety of ways of thinking, as to how, power is conceptualized, exercised, and the various effects of power, while also considering how the power relations and practices, can be transformed for the better. The variety of theories have a common concern, that different knowledges of gender relations, have different political and ethical implications. As argued by the authors, feminism implies a case for, emancipation, resistance, and agency. Accordingly, feminist methodology, should try to capture, whether, the interventions are able to generate resistance power, the spirit of agency and, emancipatory tendencies among the targeted women.

As cited in Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002),[8] according to Ahmed et al (2000), feminist notions of liberation, emancipation, and social transformation, imply freedom from oppression and freedom to live differently, which is more an area of debate and difference, rather than concensus and agreement.

As emphasized by Kirstein Campbell (2014), the thrust in feminist research is to demonstrate that power relations shape knowledge formation, thus necessitating the emergence of reconstructive project to develop new models, of discovering social realities. The primary focus of such project is to produce transformative knowledges and newer understandings of the social world, and the evolution of a critical perspective. As believed by Kirsten, this has a significant influence in popularizing the feminist standpoint theories or situated knowledges.[9]

According to Kirstein Campbell (2014),[10] in feminist epistemology, the politics of subjectivity intersects with the politics of knowledge. Again as pointed out by Kirstein Campbell (2014), based on the idea that, power relations shape knowledge making, there appeared to be an increasing emphasis upon intersecting relations of power, that produce knowledge, and the popularization of the ideas of 'oppositional', or 'intersectional', epistemologies, with the focus on provision of theories of knowledge, capable of

capturing and critiquing, social and global inequities. Moreover, there was a growing recognition of the development of feminist knowledge as an interdisciplinary field of research, (sociology to legal theory), with methodologically pluralistic and politically diverse field of epistemology. (Campbell, 2014).

It emerges that feminist research, is primarily concerned with social issues which are of concern to women and had been ignored or overlooked by the male dominated society for long. Thus, the thrust is on analyzing social dynamics, power relations, relations of domination-subjugation, discriminations and inequities, that have been experienced by women as participants in various social processes and programmes. In order to effectively address the relevant issues, feminist methodology demands consideration of women's experiences and an understanding of the phenomenon from the women's viewpoint.

Wickramasinghe's (2014),writings on research literature, categorized the approach adopted by research practitioners along three broad categories, namely women-research, gender-research, and feminist research. When the focus was primarily on representation of women overtime, it is considered as women research. Again, if the primary concern is the differences in gender roles, relations, capabilities, expectations, needs, etc., then such work is categorized as gender research. Feminist research is taken to be based on differences in power relations, and considerations of an overlapping framework of oppression (class, race, etc.), highlighting the political intent (politics of power), and the ultimate desire for social/structural transformation, so as to guarantee empowerment or reflect an emancipatory role. Such a stance, may imply reversal of power politics and a challenge to the existing social structure.

According to Verta Taylor, (1998) [11], feminist researchers and scholars are concerned with the significance of validating women's experiences and incorporating such experiences in to the research process so as to define a feminist methodology with its own specificities and dimensions. Taylor (1998), discusses that, the feminist goal shared by feminist scholars is rendering women's experience visible, and incorporating such experience in to the research process i.e., validating women's experiences, so as to counter, the prevailing gender imbalance, and generate knowledge claims, that can effectively challenge gender inequality. Further, Taylor (1998), identifies five core features of feminist research methodology as, focus on gender imbalance, attempt to validate, or to give voice to women's lived experiences, and enable the researcher to understand their problems, more in their terms, advocate research techniques which are more participatory, closing the gap between the researcher and the researched, with a thrust on an action oriented policy component, influenced by social activism, recognising the role played by reflexivity, and acknowledging that, the researcher's social position may influence knowledge production and interpretation of data. The view supports the idea of encouraging inclusion of women, not only in development initiatives, and programmes, but also as research participants.

Therefore, an important feature of feminist approach to research is to focus on women's perspectives, and include their experiences as important data sources, with the aim of identifying the social problems and gender imbalances and subsequently trying to overcome the same through corrective policy measures and transformational agendas.

As per the observations of Mary Margaret Fonow and Judith A. Cook, (1991),[12] in feminist research, the feminist perspective is used to view the process of inquiry and the associated social, historical and, political context, and a common interdisciplinary platform is created for feminist researchers to share their insights and experiences, and understand the hidden patriarchal gender relations and exploitative mechanisms. Some of the important aspects of such feminist research are reflexivity, action oriented research, emphasis on affective components of research etc.

As pointed out by M. Wickramasinghe (2014), that feminists have attempted to adopt research approaches tending to focus on ''filling up knowledge gaps and 'feminizing' processes of knowledge production''.[13] In this context, as considered by M. Wickramasinghe (2014), the role of subjectivity in feminist research needs special mention, both from the perspective of the researcher and researched.

Therefore, the researchers background including the social, educational, perspectival, and cultural, dimensions play an important role in identification, construction, representation, interpretation, and analysis of research problems and findings. Moreover, the research subjects' contextuality, situatedness, locational specificities, generates meaningful knowledge from their standpoint, which may be partial, value-laden, multiple, but, are crucial in giving space to the marginalized in constructing knowledge and framing their conceptualization of social realities.

As noted by Fonow and Cook (1991), reflexivity is a tendency among feminist researchers to critically examine, explore analytically, and reflect upon the research process, and fieldwork experiences. Such reflexivity is believed to generate, creative insight through consciousness of oppression, experiences of contradiction, and self-awareness, ultimately paving the way for transformative agendas and revelation of hidden asymmetries.

As explained by M. Wickramasinghe (2014), research activism is a special feature of feminist research, covering several spheres, like, research focused on, consciousness raising , education, influencing policies or developmental interventions, gender mainstreaming, generating attitudinal shifts, and, building up resistance.

Action agenda in feminist research is also claimed by Fonow and Cook (1991), to be an important feature of feminist research, with focus on "knowledge-from-below", reducing distance between researcher and researched, and also uniting research participants. Moreover, as argued, by them, in feminist research results should impact policies, and must lead to policy reformulations, empowering women to confront, resist and, challenge, the existing exploitative social structure. Feminist epistemology, attempts to analyse and reflect on, the assumptions related to the underlying gender-relations, in the context of the research problem.

Action research, in the opinion of Anol Bhatterjee (2012), concentrates simultaneously on, problem solving and insight generation, and is therefore considered, to be effective in bridging the gap between research and practice.

It can be inferred that research based on the sincere and active involvement of women developmental agents or activists should be prioritized, as it enables making the invisible, visible, or helps in revealing the effort put in by such agents to sustain developmental initiatives. This is more because, the women concerned may not have the necessary expertise, to project their contribution and illustrate their activities and initiatives. Thus, it becomes the moral responsibility of the research community to give recognition to the social value of their activism. Moreover, if sincerely planned and executed such an approach may also pave the way for action research which appears to be another important feature of feminist research. Further, feminist activism may be instilled and the research participants may in turn, be influenced to question existing policy features and invite suitable changes, increasing the effectiveness of the concerned programmes. Thus, the most suitable approach to feminist research is the one based on a pluralist stand with attempts to focus on pluralism and consciousness-raising. The women social agent and her experiences have a significant contribution in knowledge building and dissemination of vital information through the initiatives of groups of women who can translate their collective thinking via sharing of their experiences. Another important consideration, in such research, is that, the researcher, in this context, cannot be considered to play the role of a 'detached observer', but more of an active agent attempting to equip the researched with the spirit of activism.

According to feminist scholars, like M. Fonow and J. A. Cook (1991), consciousness-raising at the 'rupture points', where the inequities or dominations, are experienced to the largest possible degree, help in revealing hidden aspects. In line with this observation, it is of relevance to examine whether, in the context of institutionalized microfinance, under the NRLM scheme, the overburdened SHG/Cluster/Federation leaders, at the 'rupture points', break the silence, and start challenging the existing structures and policies, and demand changes in approaches as a way out by expressing and revealing their grievances. In this regard it needs to be mentioned that, collective consciousness and encouragement of collaborative research, results in innovative approaches to tackle gender discriminations.

The quantitative outcome-based evaluations emerging from Neoliberal paradigm, fails to reveal the institutional processes through which such outcomes are achieved. However, such top-down theoretical approach based on generalizations, and focusing on objective measurements of 'outcomes' may only ensure larger visibility of women in the market space, addressing their 'practical needs.' But their 'strategic needs', may remain unsatisfied. What is important to explore is that, 'the social bonding and associational life' may not always be harmonious, but, may inherently be conflictual and contradictory.(Rankin, 2002).

In the context of microfinancial interventions, sole reliance on quantitative-outcome based evaluations, with a focus on repayment behaviour, or, on the number of groups and bank-linkages formed, number and volume of loans sanctioned, or the additional income generated from loan-use, may obscure, some of the 'processual' qualitative impact and, increased work pressure of 'women programme beneficiaries'. Again, peer group repayment pressure, may act as an invisible controlling and disciplining device, disturbing the women borrower's autonomy and self-dignity. Moreover, the non-cooperative attitude of the bank and/or Government officials, may not be captured in quantitative analysis adequately. Feminist research raises important questions at this juncture regarding, whether, such interventionist strategies, successfully challenge, or entrench existing social hierarchies and patterns of subordination. The gendered identity of the micro-entrepreneurs needs to be explored in the context of such targeted developmental initiatives, instead of, overemphasizing their entrepreneurial capacity. In order to explore the associated gender relations and the hidden power dynamics involved in such strategies, the qualitative approach appears to be more relevant.

Therefore, it appears that, a bottom-up, qualitative, practical, pluralist approach, based on contextualization, is to be adopted for analysing the power dimensions in the implementation of such Neoliberal strategies.

According to M. N. Srinivas, A. M. Shah, E.A. Ramaswamy (2002), it is not only important to listen to the voices from below, but even more important, to ensure the upward flow of such information.[14] This is required in order to make relevant impact on policy priorities and policy features, keeping the focus on the transformative agenda of feminist research.

Feminist methodology emerges out of the doubts and criticism raised by feminist scholars against the conventional methodologies which fail to adequately include women issues and concern, and the lived experiences of the marginalized.

As pointed out by Doucet and Mauthner (2005), feminist scholars were trying to concentrate on alternative methodologies, as they were strongly reacting to both 'academic' and 'popular' knowledge, which according to them, was supposed to be based on men's lives, male ways of thinking, and problems as articulated by men, and that women's lives and their dominant spheres, like

domestic work, child care etc were 'rendered invisible'. As a reaction to the analysis of women's lives and experiences, theorized and viewed through 'malestream lenses', alternative research methods suited to feminist aims, interests, problems, and experiences, were suggested.[15]

According to Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002), feminist approaches to research have been conditioned by Western philosophy and epistemology, and the feminist responses to these concerns have resulted in a variety of methodologies and solution types. One of the major concerns in feminist research is to explore how gender relations, impact the lives and experiences of social agents, and analyse how to generate or produce knowledge, related to social life, justify and establish it, and make others believe the same. In all such contexts, the choice of methodologies plays an important role, and feminist methodological choices also help in establishing or verifying links between ideas, experiences, and social realities. The authors claim to consider, feminist methodology with reference to social research on gendered lives, and a social investigation of gendered experiences, relationships and inequalities.

According to M. Wickramasinghe (2014), intuition is considered to play a very important role in researching, critical reading and thinking, and subsequently in shaping the research methodology. Such intuitions as argued by the author, are to a large extent guided or shaped by, childhood experiences of women's oppression, based on, micro-politics, and the subtle inequalities, and injustices, and discriminations of daily life witnessed in the family. Thus, it is claimed that, 'the experiential and instinctive knowledge of gender differences', get translated into the research methodology, of the researcher, i.e., the subjectivity of the researcher, influences the research process. Research methodology is further conditioned by, as specified by the author, the assumptions regarding knowledge, the methods of data collection, construction and analysis, theorizations, and ethical concerns.

As claimed by B. Hussain and Amir Zada Asad (2012), feminist research acknowledges that exclusion of, women's lived experiences and silencing of their representations, would only give a partial, or distorted view of the social processes. Therefore, women's standpoint is highly relevant in the context of feminist research.

Further, even though the authors, Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002),[16] identifies a few salient features of feminism, as, diverse, decentred, exclusionary, (excluding non-feminism), implying a unified subject, sharing a gendered social position, they also raise an important question, as to whether women represent a variable social category or not ? Another important question which is raised, is that, though there seems to be common interests among women, but, they are exposed to differing experiences of injustice. So a whole lot of contradictions emerge centering feminism, and feminist methodology.

According to Basharat Hussain and Amir Zada Asad (2012),[17] the diversity in experiences creates multiple standpoints, and lays the ground for pluralistic approach in place of a unified approach and universalized solution. Further, as pointed out by Basharat Hussain and Amir Zada Asad (2012), feminism refers to the belief and claim that women should have the same rights, powers and opportunities as men. Feminist scholars argue that women suffer more than men, are more poor than men and are discriminated in all welfare policies, and based on such assumptions, the feminist research approach can be distinguished from other research approaches, in terms of, four distinct grounds which include focusing on gender relations, the validity of personal experience as against conventional emphasize on scientific method; rejecting hierarchy in research relationship between the researcher and the researched; and the adoption of emancipation of women as the goal of research. Rheinharz's view as referred to in Basharat Hussain and Amir Zada Asad (2012), is that "feminist research practices must be known as a plurality, that is, a perspective that uses several methodologies" [18]. As argued by Basharat Hussain & Amir Zada Asad (2012), the main thrust in feminist research is to challenge the male perspectives.

Moreover, as argued, even within methodological pluralities, there are certain commonalities. Some of the common features of feminist research within the pluralistic approach, are, recognition of women's experiences and perspectives, identification and concern over power imbalances between researcher and researched, reliance on qualitative approaches, challenging the existing traditional scientific enquiry, and, the political nature of research.

In Feminist Methodology and Epistemology, Doucet and Mauthner (2005), attempts to identify, the distinguishing features of feminist methodologies and feminist methods, give an historical overview of feminist epistemologies, and also establish how a new area of feminist research, has been born by combining feminist epistemologies and methodologies, based on contemporary writings related to the area. Further, as observed by the authors, development of feminist epistemologies to a large extent has been influenced by feminist scientists' reactions and critique to the gender bias (for example, exclusive use of male subjects, male activity, male dominant animal populations in experimental research), related to collection, interpretation, and organization of data in scientific research. As pointed out further, epistemological concerns based on the nature of knowledge, how to gain it, how beliefs are justified, how true claims are explained and established, particularly from a gender perspective, raised questions regarding the relevance of specifically feminist epistemologies in the context of feminist analysis.

As noted by Doucet and Mauthner (2005), feminist epistemologies, addressed traditional epistemological questions focusing on the role of gender and in the late 1980s, Sandra Harding (1987b),[19] proposed a 'threefold classification' of feminist approaches, as, feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint epistemologies, and transitional /post modern epistemologies.

Later, however, under the influence of the post-modern, post-colonial, critiques, Doucet (2005), points out that the importance of multiple perspectives came to be recognized and feminist standpoint tended to move in a pluralistic direction.

As elaborated by Doucet and Mauthner (2005), feminist empiricism, is feminist critique of science, claiming that, all 'facts' and 'findings', are value ridden, and that, value judgement, plays an important role in empirical enquiries, that beliefs are established by the ideologies in the world, that empiricism is a theory of evidence, and that knowledge, is possessed and acquired by communities and not by individuals, and these communities are science communities and, epistemological communities. Further, feminist standpoint epistemologies, focused on, differential powers of groups to define knowledge, with marginalized groups, enjoying a privileged location, and emphasized the significance of women's experiences, or their 'situated knowledge', and 'standpoints', emerging under the influence of power-relations exhibited in the social structures to which they belong, or where they are located. Again, it is noted that, Nancy Harstock (1998), has explained that, a standpoint is, "achieved rather obvious, a mediated rather than an immediate understanding" [20]. Further, as noted, Patricia Hill Collins (1997), has also defined standpoint as, "historically shared group-based experiences".[21]

Finally as demonstrated by, Doucet and Mauthner (2005), postmodern feminist epistemologies, and postcolonial critiques, highlighted, the shortcomings in, the treatment of 'women', as unified object of theorizing or as unified subjects of knowing, the notion of reflexivity and the role of the researcher as a knowledge producer, plurality of perspectives, multiple or fragmented perspectives, and many situated standpoints. Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002), also identified that, there are criticisms against feminist claims to knowledge, particularly from the dominant approaches based on inadequacies in providing unbiased, rational, and authoritative knowledge. However, counterarguments to such criticisms also emerges in reminding the critics, that feminist research having a political stance and attempting to challenge power asymmetries, cannot be expected to be completely value-free and objective, but is bound to be judgemental and value-laden. Moreover, a pluralistic approach, and accommodation of the diverse experiences of subjugation across several communities, and categories of women, and along various axes, like class, caste, ethnic groups, etc., will strengthen the analysis and expand the ambit of feminist research. The way out in such context is rich qualitative analysis to adequately deal with specificities and pluralities, and avoid overarching generalizations.

III. SECTION-III : CONCLUDING THOUGHT

Research, or the academic investigation for truth in the field of natural or pure sciences as also in the realm of social sciences, involves the exploration of either natural or, social phenomena based on rigorous, scientific analysis of the research data obtained and associated research problem, or the unearthing of newer notions, concepts, laws, techniques, constraints, solutions, relations, as also newer phenomena or events. While, natural science research, focuses on the physical world, natural laws, and natural phenomena, social science research explores, the social world, social phenomena, social laws, social agents, and their behaviour and relationships. Feminist research, is a subset of social science research, essentially concentrating on, gender dimensions and issues, gender roles, gender imbalances and inequities, gender discriminations, gender governance, gender budgeting and above all gender justice. It can be considered that, feminist research is associated with, the representation and construction of 'multiple realities of women', in a social context, and multiple conceptualisations of their diverse experiences of their subjugation, domination, discrimination, and aims at initiating transformations at the micro level of the subjugated social agent, and also at the macro societal level.

As opined by scholars like, M. Wickramasinghe (2014), the relevant research methodology should be preferably based on 'inclusion of subjective experiences' [22], deviating from the 'institutionally sanctioned', methodological approach of positivism. Further, M. Wickramasinghe (2014), affirms that, 'feminism', can be conceptualized as some form of activism, either in terms of 'consciousness raising', or, analyses, or critique of, the various forces of power that affect the conditions of women. Therefore, for achieving the transformatory goal, identifying the disguised exploitative tendencies, and countering the established forces of power, the focus needs to be shifted towards the 'voices' of the marginalized to generate alternative methodologies, to strengthen demands for gender justice.

As observed by R. Smith, (2013), participatory, bottom-up approaches, based on a narration of personal experiences, gives the opportunity of incorporating, and giving explicit voice to the distinct perspectives of those experiencing the phenomenon. Further, such experiences, also help in developing 'contextual understanding' of the phenomenon and its impact, as also allowing participants to reframe problems and articulate solutions from their perspectives, as alternatives to conventional understandings. M. Swigonski (1993),[23] is of the view that, the participants, or the socially deprived agents, who are considered to be 'experts by experience', get an opportunity to reveal their 'opposed understandings', which are normally disregarded. It is considered to be effective in impacting the lives of the subjugated, with the 'participant's feedback influencing practice', and democratize ways of knowledge generation. Therefore, research from within, or 'research from the underside', helps to identify 'hidden' asymmetries of power, trace the process of change induced, social and behavioural mechanisms, while trying to secure social justice.[24] (B. Holman, 1987).

Thus, feminist research is related to some 'commitment' towards change for women, both at the local and international level, (Wickramasinghe, 2014) [25], i.e., it is basically transformative and emancipatory research. Hence, for meaningful feminist research, as observed by Katherine Sarikakis, Ramona R. Rush, Autumn Grubb-Swetnam, and Christina Lane (2009) , in order to

fulfill the 'ethical commitment', towards the communities being researched upon, the research approaches and the research methods needs to be revisited, so as to portray, the specific gendered experiences, through the 'multiplicity of voices', free of distortions, to discover new forms of hidden power dynamics not captured by the official language and representation. Literature survey confirms that, in order to truly reflect the experiences of subjugation, a qualitative approach is justified, to gain insight into the women's standpoint. The ultimate aim is reflected as the transformation of the women as 'objects of knowledge' to their role as 'providers of knowledge'.

NOTES

1. source : www.newagepublishers.com/samplechapter/000896.pdf. Simulation approach based research, enables the researcher, to represent a dynamic process in terms of a numerical model, by artificially constructing an environment for the generation of relevant information and research data.
2. source : www.newagepublishers.com/samplechapter/000896.pdf.
3. Harding, S. (1987a). "Introduction : Is There A Feminist Method ?" pp-1-14 in Feminism and Methodology, ed S. Harding, Bloomington Indiana University Press, cited in A. Doucet and Mauthner, Feminist Methodologies and Epistemology 2005, pp-38.
4. source : arXiv:physics060114009v3 [physics.gen-ph] 14 Oct 2013
5. Reinharz, S. (1992), Feminist Methods in Social Research, cited in A Critique on Feminist Research Methodology, B. Hussain and Amir Zada Asad (2012) (page-203)
6. Hammersley, M. (1992) : On Feminist Methodology, Sociology 26(2), 187-206, cited in A Critique on Feminine Research Methodology, B. Hussain and Amir Zada Asad, page-206
7. Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002), Introduction, pp-5
8. Ahmed, Sara, Kilby, Jane, Lury, Celia, McNeil, Maureen, Pearce, Lynn, and Skeggs, Beverley (eds) (2000). Transformations : Thinking Through Feminism, Routledge, London cited in Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002), Introduction, pp-6.
9. As discussed by K. Campbell, while Haraway (1991, Simians, Cyborgs, and Women : The Reinvention of Nature, London, Free Association) emphasizes, knowledge building based on 'critical vision' resulting from a 'critical positioning' in the society, Harstock [1983, 'The Feminist Standpoint', in S. Harding and Merill Hintikka (eds), Discovering Reality : Feminist Perspectives in Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science, Dordrecht, Boston and London, Reidel] and Harding (1991, The Science Question in Feminism, Milton Keynes : Open University Press), concentrates on experiential standpoint arguments i.e., different knowledges emerging from a variety of experiences of the marginalized, cited in, Mary Evans, et al (eds) (2014), The SAGE Handbook of Feminist Theory, pp-97
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11. Feminist Issue in Research Methodology : The Development of a Cognitive Scale, Feminism & Psychology (2001) vol-XI (2) : 209-227, 0959-3535 (200105) XI : 2 ; 209-227; 014519
12. Ch-I, Back to the Future : A Look at the Second Wave of Feminist Epistemology and Methodology, in Mary Margaret Fonow and Judith A. Cook, (eds), Beyond Methodology Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis.
13 . M.Wickramasinghe (2014), pp-62.
14. Preface to Second Edition, The Fieldworker and the Field, pp-vii.
15. S. Harding (1987a), "Introduction : Is There A Feminist Method ?",pp 1-14 in Feminism and Methodology, (ed) S. Harding, Bloomington: Indiana University Press cited in Doucet and Mauthner (2005), pp-38.
16. Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002), introduction, (pp-7).
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18. B. Hussain and Amir Zada Asad (2012), pp-203.
19. Cited by the authors Doucet and Mauthner (2005), in Feminist Methodologies and Epistemology, pp- 37.
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24. B. Holman (1987), Research from the underside, British Journal of Social Work 17 (6), pp-669-683, cited in, R.Smith (2013), Doing Social Work Research.
25. M.Wickramasinghe (2014), Introduction, pp-12.

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