

Personal Liberation Journey: A Case Study Through a Decolonial Development Perspective

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Article

Introduction

Decolonial development theory highlights how systems of domination can persist long after formal colonial rule has ended. These structures are rooted in hierarchy, control, and dependency—often reappear in social and cultural institutions, including the household. This paper presents a personal case study illustrating how domestic power relations can function as micro-colonial systems. By examining my experience through a decolonial lens, I demonstrate how individual emancipation can contribute to broader processes of empowerment and social transformation.

Domestic Confinement as a Micro-Colonial Structure

Following marriage, I entered a domestic environment characterized by restricted mobility, surveillance, and limited autonomy. Decision-making power was concentrated in the hands of a senior household authority figure, who controlled my movements, social interactions, and daily responsibilities. Even routine activities, such as visiting my parents, required explicit permission.

This domestic arrangement mirrored the logic of colonial governance: centralized authority, unquestioned obedience, and the extraction of labour without equitable recognition. Alongside my professional responsibilities, I was expected to perform extensive household labour and emotional caregiving. Despite fulfilling these roles, my contributions were undervalued, reinforcing a cycle of dependency similar to the economic extraction experienced by many post-colonial societies.

Key Points on Challenges and Domestic Power Structures

- **Deeply embedded cultural norms** often make it difficult to question or transform household hierarchies, as these norms are perceived as natural or traditional.
- **Resistance from authority figures** can arise when individuals attempt to assert autonomy, since change is often viewed as a threat to established power relations.
- **Emotional and economic dependency** can limit a person's ability to challenge restrictive environments, reinforcing cycles of control and compliance.

- **Normalization of unequal labor** especially gendered domestic work that makes exploitation invisible and socially accepted.
- **Lack of safe spaces for dialogue** prevents individuals from expressing concerns, sharing experiences, or seeking support within the household.
- **Internalized expectations** about obedience, sacrifice, and gender roles can create psychological barriers to self-advocacy and empowerment.
- **Limited mobility and restricted decision-making** reduce opportunities for personal growth, education, and community engagement.
- **Household-level inequalities** often mirror broader structural inequalities in society, making change complex and multi-layered.
- **Absence of supportive policies or community resources** can further isolate individuals experiencing domestic power imbalances.
- **Transforming domestic culture** requires sustained effort, collective awareness, and a shift from dominance-based rules to supportive, equitable practices.

Psychological and Emotional Consequences

The combination of restricted freedom of actions, self-determination, independence, unappreciated labor, and emotional pressure resulted in psychological distress and exhaustion. Research on gendered oppression demonstrates that such environments can produce long-term emotional harm, diminished self-worth, and internalized dependency.

My experience reflected key features of micro colonial systems:

- control over mobility
- extraction of labor
- denial of agency
- reinforcement of dependency

These dynamics illustrate how patriarchal domestic structures can replicate broader patterns of domination found in colonial contexts.

Turning Point: Reclaiming Personal Autonomy/Control

Reaching a point of emotional saturation marked the beginning of my emancipation. Recognizing that my well-being required structural change, I began to reclaim control over my decisions, goals, and identity role. This shift parallels historical moments in post-colonial societies where resistance emerges from the realization that existing systems are unsustainable.

I initiated a process of self-reflection, identified my strengths, and set personal and professional objectives. Choosing to prioritize my own development represented a form of self-determined growth grounded in agency, empowerment, and resilience.

Healing Through Community Support

My healing process was supported by peers, community networks, and individuals who had experienced similar challenges. Sharing stories created a sense of solidarity and mutual understanding. This aligns with the People-to-People approach in development practice, which emphasizes collective empowerment, shared learning, and community-based support systems.

Through dialogue and connection, I not only received support but also contributed to the empowerment of others. This reciprocal exchange reflects participatory development models where lived experience becomes a resource for collective transformation.

Implications for Development Practice

This personal journey offers several insights relevant to development practitioners, particularly those working on gender, empowerment, and community resilience.

Understanding Structural Oppression

The case demonstrates how oppressive systems operate beyond political and economic spheres, extending into cultural and domestic settings. Recognizing these micro-colonial structures is essential for designing interventions that address gender inequality and social injustice.

Promoting Agency and Empowerment

Key elements of this liberation process of self-awareness, goal setting, economic independence, and emotional resilience can inform empowerment programs, especially those targeting women in restrictive environments.

Creating Safe Spaces for Communication

My healing was facilitated by open conversations with others. Development initiatives can benefit from establishing safe, inclusive spaces where individuals can share experiences, build solidarity, and develop coping strategies.

Valuing Lived Experience as Knowledge

Lived experience can serve as a powerful tool for learning and transformation. Integrating personal narratives into development practice can strengthen community engagement and inspire others facing similar challenges.

Advocating for Structural and Cultural Change

The case highlights the need for development interventions to address:

- gender norms
- mental health
- domestic power relations
- equitable distribution of work.

These factors are essential for sustainable social transformation.

Conclusion

This case study illustrates how domestic environments can reproduce micro-colonial systems of control, dependency, and labour extraction. My journey from confinement to empowerment reflects broader themes in decolonial development theory, demonstrating that liberation is both a personal and collective process. By reclaiming agency, seeking community support, and transforming lived experience into a source of empowerment for others, individuals can contribute meaningfully to social change. This narrative underscores the importance of integrating personal experience, community engagement, and structural analysis into development practice.

Suggestions

Safe Spaces and the Home as a Unit of Personal Growth in Culture and Community

Safe and supportive environments are essential for individual development, and the household is often the first social unit where these conditions should ideally exist. A home functions not only as a physical space but as a cultural micro-system where values, norms, and emotional practices are formed. When domestic rules are grounded in mutual respect rather than dominance, the household becomes a site of personal growth, emotional security, and collective well-being. Such environments enable individuals to express themselves freely, develop confidence, and contribute meaningfully to the cultural fabric of the family. Understanding the home as a foundational community space highlights why supportive, non-hierarchical domestic structures are critical for broader social development. When households model equity and care, they strengthen the social foundations upon which inclusive and resilient communities are built.

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