

Women Empowerment: Dimensions, Needs and Hurdles in India

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Abstract

For centuries women were not treated equal to men in many ways. They did not have share in the property of their parents, they had no voting rights, and they had no freedom to choose their work or job and so on. Now that we have come out of those dark days of oppression of women, there is a need for strong movement to fight for the rights of women and to ensure that they get all the rights which men have or in other words a movement for the Empowerment of Women. The present paper has been planned with a view to discuss the various issues related to the Empowerment of Women and to suggest measures for achieving this end. The purpose of the paper is to discuss the historical and sociological dimensions of the issue of Women Empowerment, to know the role of education in Women Empowerment, need for Women Empowerment in modern context, measures for ensuring Women Empowerment and to know about the hurdles in achieving women empowerment.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Hurdles, Education

1. Introduction

Empowerment of women is essentially the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. It involves the building up of a society wherein women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being a woman in a traditionally male dominated structure.

The origins of the concept of empowerment go back to the civil rights movement in the USA in 1960. It has since then interpreted differently and filled with new meanings and is today used in such different sectors as business, social work, development discourse and by advocates of very different political agendas. The different definitions of empowerment range between defining it as a largely individual process of taking control and responsibility for one's life and situation, and defining it as a political process of granting human rights and social justice to disadvantaged group of people. At the former end of the continuum, where empowerment is defined largely as an individual process, empowerment can be used in the conservative political rhetoric of freeing the government of responsibility for injustices and for granting social security. Instead, the argument makes individuals and communities responsible for their own social security and welfare, without providing the necessary support and resources.

The empowerment of women is located within the discourse and agenda of gender equality and is increasingly being taken in the agenda of international development of organisations, perhaps more as a means to achieve gender equality than as an end in itself.

At the Social Summit in Copenhagen in 1993 and the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo 1994 Government committed themselves to the empowerment of women. This Commitment was operationalised and formulated into a clear action plan at the Fourth World Conference on women in Beijing 1995 where Governments committed themselves to the "empowerment and advancement of women, including the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief, thus contributing to

the moral, ethical, spiritual and intellectual needs of women and men, individually or in community with others and thereby guaranteeing them the possibility of realizing their full potential in society and shaping their lives in accordance with their own aspirations".

Different Levels of Empowerment in line with most theorists on empowerment the one has to view empowerment as taking place on different levels and that change on all levels is necessary if the empowerment of women is really to occur. We have to relate empowerment at three levels: empowerment on the individual, group, and societal/ community- level and the interaction between these.

The individual level deals with individual women's abilities to take control over their lives, their perceptions about their own value and abilities, their abilities to identify a goal and work towards this goal.

The group level deals with the collective action and sense of agency that woman experience together, in a group.

The societal level deals with the permissiveness of the political and social climate, the societal norms and the public discourse on what is possible and impossible for women to do, how women should behave etc.

The different levels are seen as interconnected and mutually reinforcing, e.g. when empowerment on individual level occurs, this will have effect on the group and societal level. Women who are empowered on an individual level will most likely go on and affect the other levels. Empowerment on a group level e.g. women organizing around a particular need is likely to have effect on the individual empowerment of women in the form of increased self-esteem and sense of agency.

1.2 Need and Significance of the study

India is a country of grand contradictions. While it is a global leader in the knowledge economy, it is also home to more than half the world's poor and illiterate people, most of whom are women (Reddi & Sinha, 2004). Indian women are discriminated and marginalized at every level of the society whether it is social participation, political participation, economic participation, access to education, and also

reproductive healthcare. Women are found to be economically very poor all over the India. A few women are engaged in services and other activities. So, they need economic power to stand on their own legs on a par with men. Other hand, it has been observed that women are found to be less literate than men.

According to 2001 census, rate of literacy among men in India is found to be 76% whereas it is only 54% among women. Thus, increasing education among women is of very important in empowering them. It has also noticed that some of women are too weak to work. They consume less food but work more. Therefore, from the health point of view, women folk who are to be weaker are to be made stronger. Another problem is that workplace harassment of women. There are so many cases of rape, kidnapping of girl, dowry harassment, and so on. For these reasons, they require empowerment of all kinds in order to protect themselves and to secure their purity and dignity. To sum up, women empowerment cannot be possible unless women come with and help to self-empower themselves. There is a need to formulate reducing feminized poverty, promoting education of women, and prevention and elimination of violence against women. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru first Prime Minister of India once remarked, “To awaken the people, it is women who must be awakened; once she is on the move, the family moves, the village moves and the nation moves”. So there is a greater need of bringing women into mainstream of development of India.

1.3 Objectives: The present study has the following objectives-

Obj 1: To know the historical, sociological, economical and political dimensions of the issues of women empowerment.

Obj 2: To know the hurdles in achieving women empowerment.

Obj 3: To know the role of education in women empowerment.

Obj 4: To know the measures for ensuring women empowerment.

2. Methodology

This is a qualitative study. The investigators here collected data from different secondary sources like research journals, various government organizations, books, websites etc.

2.1 Findings

According to the objectives of the study findings of the study are discussed below-

Obj 1: To know the historical, sociological, economical and political dimensions of the issues of women empowerment.

2.2 Historical background of women empowerment in India

The status of Women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millenniums. In early Vedic period Women enjoyed equal status with men. Rigved & Upanishads mention several names of women sages and seers notably Gargi & Maitrey. However later the status of women began to deteriorate approximately from 500 B.C., the situation

worsened with invasion of Mughals and later on by European invaders. Some reformatory movements by Guru Nanak, Jainism, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Pandita Ramabai and others did give some relief. It is not that Britishers didn't do anything for improving the condition of women. Some laws were enacted such as “Abolition of practice of Sati”, Widow Remarriage Act 1856 etc. The real change came after independence. Constitution of India guarantees equality to women (Article 14). There are other articles too which ensure rights of women e.g. no discrimination by the state [article 15 (1)] equality of opportunity (Article 16) etc. Feminist activism picked up momentum in India during later 1970's. Later on many groups and NGO's have been working for the Empowerment of women. We are proud that in India Women got voting right much before USA and some other European countries.

2.3 Social Empowerment

Social empowerment means a more equitable social status for women in society because the primary responsibility of any human society is to ensure human dignity to all members. It is often argued that facilitating women's access to money is not an effective means for achieving women's empowerment unless it is linked to other kinds of activities like training on awareness of the impact of women's subordination, concept of self-esteem and on the meaning and benefits of empowering women. The approach to gender equity is based on the recognition that all interventions in favour of women must ensure an environment free from all forms of violence against women and also ensure the participation and adequate representation of women at highest policy levels. For today's women, fewer things are in the category of 'not done', compared to the time of independence. One of the recommendations of the National Policy on Education-1986 is to promote empowerment of women through the agency of education and it is considered as a landmark in the approach to women education. The National Literacy Mission is another step towards eradication of illiteracy in the age group of 15-35 years by the year 1988. The universalization of elementary education, enrolment and retention of girls in the schools, promotion of balwadis and crèches, increasing the number of girls' hostel, women's polytechnics and multi-purpose institutions, non-formal adult education and, open and distance education programmes were some of the other steps taken to boost women's education leading to social empowerment.

The vision of the Eleventh Plan (2007-2012) is to ensure that every woman and child in the country is able to develop their full potential and share the benefits of growth and prosperity through a participatory approach which empowers them and makes them partners in their own development. When women gain voice in decision making which is to be started within the family, they would be in a position to take decision for improving the poor socioeconomic status. They begin to transform gender relations and so they are to be treated as equal partners in decision making and implementation rather than beneficiaries. However, women's increased participation at the decision making level can only be said to lead to their increased development and empowerment if such

participation enables them to achieve greater control over factors of production, access to resources and the distribution of benefits.

Group or collective process always provide a support for empowerment as it exposes its members to local networks and this social interaction results in awareness about local realities which also helps them to overcome the barriers for accessing the resources.

2.4 Economic Empowerment

All the poverty alleviation programmes were focussed on women as they were economically more disadvantaged than men and as their upbringing and mainstreaming are critical for the economic development of a nation.

and account their significant contributions to the production process. Economic empowerment is a process as well as a stage which is to be reached by designing strategies focusing on building credit worthiness and financial independence among women by removing all the gender-specific barriers which prevent women from gaining access to their rightful share in every spheres of life. Rural women have less access to the resources to generate stable incomes. House hold income is a poor measure of women welfare because the distribution of income within the household may be quite unequal. Various studies of intra house hold resource allocation indicates that in many regions of the world, there exist a strong bias against women in areas such as nutrition, medical care, education and inheritance.

Consequently, in the development discourse, most of the poverty alleviating programmes carry an implied agenda of women empowerment, which starts with access to credit and involvement in income generation which was accepted as sure strategies for economic empowerment. Thus women need economic empowerment because without economic strength, women cannot be able to exercise their rights and entitlements. Without reasonable income security, people lack real freedom to make rational choices and to become socially responsible. Without collective and individual voice, the vulnerable will remain that way.

The synergy produced from a group approach is much higher than that of from an individual approach which prompts the policy makers and various agencies to adopt a participatory / group approach in empowering women. The active involvement / participation of women in vibrant groups like SHGs, NHGs and the like enable them to realize the goal of empowerment.

Government of India, having realized the power and potential of self-help group approach has started mobilizing the poor women into self-help groups.

The recent studies on development issues proved that the sustainable development can be made possible by making women an equally important paradigm of the development process.

2.5 Political Empowerment

Political empowerment is a process that enables women to increase their mobility and break their isolation, to develop their self-confidence and self-image and to establish their public presence whereby they participate in decision making

in an expanding frame work of awareness and critical analysis to control and influence the direction of development. Political equality includes not only equal right to franchise but also more importantly, the right to access to the institutionalized centres of power. Participation of women in Panchayati Raj has been recognized as a step towards equality.

Today, one of the issues of concern is the level of women's participation in political life. Political participation includes the right to vote, right to contest, right to candidature, their role as women as campaigners, members and their involvement in the decision making process and appointment of women at all levels of government. Reserving seats for women in the political institutions will provide them an opportunity to raise their grievances and other related personal and social problems in a formal manner. The participation of women in the electoral process is an indicator of their political consciousness as well as their aspiration for status enhancement. The figures concerning women's common participation has been more or less steadily expanding over the years through various elections as voters and as candidates and in terms of participation in campaigning. The number of women getting elected to representative body has been steadily increasing.

Obj 2: To know the hurdles in achieving women empowerment.

There are several constraints that check the process of women empowerment in India. Social norms and family structure in developing countries like India, manifests and perpetuate the subordinate status of women. One of the norms is the continuing preference for a son over the birth of a girl child which in present in almost all societies and communities. The society is more biased in favour of male child in respect of education, nutrition and other opportunities. Women often internalize the traditional concept of their role as natural thus inflicting an injustice upon them. Poverty is the reality of life for the vast majority women in India. It is the factor that poses challenge in realizing women's empowerment. There are several challenges that are plaguing the issues of women's right in India. Targeting these issues will directly benefit the empowerment of women in India.

- **Education:** While the country has grown from leaps and bounds since independence where education is concerned. The gap between women and men is severe. While 82.14% of adult men are educated, only 65.46% of adult women are known to be literate in India. The gender bias is in higher education, specialized professional trainings which hit women very hard in employment and attaining top leadership in any field.
- **Poverty:** Poverty is considered the greatest threat to peace in the world, and eradication of poverty should be a national goal as important as the eradication of illiteracy. Due to this, women are exploited as domestic helps.
- **Health and Safety:** The health and safety concerns of women are paramount for the wellbeing of a country and are an important factor in gauging the empowerment of

women in a country. However there are alarming concerns where maternal healthcare is concerned.

- **Professional Inequality:** This inequality is practiced in employment and promotions. Women face countless handicaps in male customized and dominated environs in Government Offices and Private enterprises.
- **Morality and Inequality:** Due to gender bias in health and nutrition there is unusually high mortality rate in women reducing their population further especially in Asia, Africa and China. Household Inequality: Household relations show gender bias in infinitesimally small but significant manners all across the globe, more so, in India e.g. sharing burden of housework, childcare and menial works by so called division of work.

Obj 3: To know the role of education in women empowerment.

According to the Indian constitution, women are legal citizens of our country and have equal rights with men. Owing to the lack of acceptance from the male dominant society, Indian women suffer tremendously. Women empowerment is a global issue and discussion on women political rights are at the forefront of many formal and informal campaigns worldwide. The concept of women empowerment was introduced at the international women conference at NAROIBI in 1985. Education is a milestone of women empowerment because it enables them to respond to the challenges, to confront their traditional role and change their life. So that we can't neglect the importance of education in reference to women empowerment, India is poised to become a superpower, a developed country by 2020. Education increases the economic, social and political opportunities available to women. Education increases women's knowledge about controlling fertility and access to family planning services and often encourages them to delay the age at which they marry.

Education is a powerful tool of social transformation. Hence, education for women has to be paid special attention. Greater access for women to education must be ensured in the educational system. Gender sensitivity must be developed. A watch has to be kept on dropout rate of girls and corrective measures should be taken to check the dropout rates.

Within the framework of a democratic polity, our laws, development, policies, plan and programmes have aimed at women's advancement in different spheres. From the fifth five year plan (1974-78) onwards there has been a marked shift in the approach to women's issues from welfare to development. In recent years, the empowerment of women has been recognized as the central issue in the status of women. The National Commission of women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women. The 73rd and 74th amendments (1993) to the constitution of India have provided for reservation of seats in the local bodies of Panchayats and Municipalities for women, laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision making at local level. In view of low literacy rate of women and the gigantic task of educating rural women a suitable strategy will have to be planned. Many schemes were started for their socio-economic development. Credit for

consumption has been the hall mark of many projects that include micro finance. The National Mission for the Empowerment of Women (NMEW) has been launched by Government of India on International Women's Day on 2010 with the aim to strengthen overall processes that promote all-round development of women. It has the mandate to strengthen the inter-sector convergence; facilitating the process of coordinating all the women's welfare and socio-economic development programmes across ministries and departments. The Mission aims to provide a single window service for all programmes run by the government for women under ages of various Central Ministries. In light with its mandate, the Mission has been named Mission Pooerna Shakti, implying a vision for holistic empowerment of women. The National Resource Centre for women has been set up which functions as a national convergence centre for all schemes and programmes for women. It acts as a central repository of knowledge, information, research and data on all gender related issues and is the main body servicing the National and State Mission Authority. The major task is to identify the areas where these groups in fact, are facing problems because at this stage only the problem solving adult learning technique will attract these rural people to improve their working and income.

Governmental Organizations are formal agencies working for the empowerment of women. They organize seminars, conferences and workshops for the awakening of the masses. Their mass appeal – style contributes to a better understanding of women's rights and of the means to ensure the enjoyment of those rights and the elimination of discrimination. They prepare urban and rural uneducated women for self – employment, which is vital for the economic empowerment of the women. In short, all these programs and functions of NGO's contribute towards the realization of sustainable community development and hence women empowerment.

Promotion of equality between women & men and the empowerment of women is central to the work of United Nations. The UN actively promotes women's human rights and works to eradicate, discourage of violence against women, including in armed conflict and through trafficking. There are various UN agencies working for the empowerment of women like The Commission on the Status of women, The Committee on the elimination of discrimination against women, The Division for the advancement of women, The United Nations Development Fund for women, and recently, the UN Women association is formed which co-ordinates the activities of all the former UN agencies. These international agencies work to ensure that women have a real voice in all governance institutions, from the judiciary to the civil service, as well as in the private sector and civil society. So they can participate equally with men in public dialogue and decision-making and influence the decisions that will determine the future of their families and countries.

Obj 4: To know the measures for ensuring women empowerment.

Some measures have been taken for empowering women. Those are:

- Changes in women's mobility and social interaction

- Changes in women's labour patterns
- Changes in women's access to and control over resources and
- Changes in women's control over Decision making
- Providing education
- Self-employment and Self-help group
- Providing minimum needs like Nutrition, Health, Sanitation, Housing

Other than this society should change the mentality towards the word women Encouraging women to develop in their fields they are good at and make a career.

At present, the Government of India has over 34 schemes for women operated by different department and ministries. Some of these are as follows:

- Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescence Girls (RGSEAG) (2010).
- The Rajiv Gandhi National Crèche Scheme for Children of Working Mothers.
- Integrated Child Protection scheme (ICPS) (2009-2010).
- Dhanalakshmi (2008).
- Short Stay Homes.
- Ujjawala (2007).
- Scheme for Gender Budgeting (XI Plan).
- Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP).
- Training of Rural Youth for Self-Employment (TRYSEM).
- Prime Minister's Rojgar Yojana (PMRY).
- Women's Development Corporation Scheme (WDCS).

3. Conclusion

The Empowerment of Women has become one of the most important concerns of 21st century not only at national level but also at the international level. Government initiatives alone would not be sufficient to achieve this goal. Society must take initiative to create a climate in which there is no gender discrimination and women have full opportunities of self-decision making and participating in social, political and economic life of the country with a sense of equality. The popular UNESCO slogan should be considered as an ideal for not only empowerment but also development of women: "Educate a man and you educate an individual; educate a woman and you educate a family".

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