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## “WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: PAST TO PRESENT”

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### ABSTRACT

Women empowerment is emerging as one of the top priorities in the entire world and for that it is important to educate the girl child. Constitution of India guarantees equality to women (Article 14). National policy for the empowerment of women (2001) assured equal access to women the health care, quality education participation and decision making in social, political and economic life of the nation. The social stigma like child marriage, female feticide, child abuse and child prostitution must be eradicated immediately. Greater access for women to education must be ensured in the educational system. Apart from Government organization, Government also organize seminar, conference and workshop for the awakening of masses.

**Keyword:** Empowerment, Social Stigma

### Introduction

Women, the first school of the child, constitute roughly one half of the world's population. But their social, economic and political status is lower than that of men in almost all countries of the world. For centuries women were not treated equal to men in many ways. They were not allowed to own property, they did not have a share in the property of their parents, they had no voting rights, they had no freedom to choose their work or job and so on. Of course, women do enjoy better position in some societies, but their overall position everywhere is lower than their male counterparts. 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.

### Meaning of Women Empowerment

Women empowerment has now become a buzzword in India. Women empowerment is a new phrase in the vocabulary of gender literature. The phrase is used in two broad senses i.e.

general and specific. In a general sense, it refers to empowering women to be self-dependent by providing them access to all the freedoms and opportunities, which they were denied in the past only because of their being women. In a specific sense, women empowerment refers to enhancing their position in the power structure of the society.

The word women empowerment essentially means that the women have the power or capacity to regulate their day to day lives in the social, political and economic terms – a power which enables them to move from the periphery to the centre stage.

Education is a milestone for women empowerment because it enables them to respond to opportunities, to challenge their traditional rules and to change their lives. Similar ideas were supported in the International conference on population and Development in Cairo 1994. It was said that education is one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skill and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process.

This commitment was operationalised and formulated into a clear action plan at the Fourth World Conference on women in Beijing 1995, marked a significant turning point for the global agenda for gender equality. Here 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.

### **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 & upnishads mention several names of women sagas and seers notably Gargi and Maitrey. However later the status of women began to deteriorate approximately from 500B.C. the situation worsened with invasion of Mughals and later on by European invaders.

Some reformatory movements by Guru Nanak, Jainism, Raja Ram Mohan Rai, Ishwarchandra Vidya Sagal, Pandita Rama Bai 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). These 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.

### **Steps Undertaken in India for women Empowerment**

The constitution framers were very much conscious of the problem of women empowerment hence they ensured that the Principle of Gender Equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its preamble, fundamental duties and Directive Principle. Moreover the constitution also empowers the states to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women.

The real impetus for this movement was gained under the Prime Minister ship of Mrs.Indira Gandhi when a scheme known as Indira Mahila Yojana was launched. Various other schemes were also launched for the empowerment of women such as Rashtriya Mahila Kosh, Mahila Samridhi Yojana, Self help groups at Panchayat level and many more. The establishment of National women's commission and state women's commissions were important milestones in the direction of women empowerment in India.

The National Policy for the empowerment of women (2001) was an important step taken by the Government of the time for accelerating the pace of women empowerment. The policy assured equal access to women the health care, quality education, participation and decision making in Social, Political and Economical life of the nation.

### **Need for Women Empowerment**

Inspite of the various measures taken up by the government after Independence and even during British rule the women haven't been fully empowered. We may be proud of women in India occupying highest officers of president, Prime Minister, Lok Sabha Speaker, Leader of the opposition or women like Ms. Chandra Kocher occupying highest positions in the Corporate Sector but the fact remains that we still witness dowry deaths, domestic violence and exploitation of women. The female foeticide is not an uncommon phenomenon.

The ground reality is deprivation, degradation and exploitation of women specially women from rural areas and those belonging to deprived sectors of the society. The urban elite class women have no doubt been benefitted by the efforts of women empowerment. Inspite of reservation being granted to women in Panchayat elections after 73 rd and 74 the constitution amendment in many Panchayats the male chauvinism does not allow them to function independently. They are members on record only.

## **Social Empowerment of Women**

Under the social empowerment of women steps needs to be taken to improve the health status of women, reduce maternal mortality especially in the areas which do not have good medical facilities. Women face high risk of malnutrition hence focused attention would have to be given to meet the nutritional needs of women at all stages of their life cycle. Awareness programmes need to be organised for creating awareness among women especially belonging to weaker section about their rights.

Government has to be vigilant for ensuring that there is no discrimination against the girl child and her rights are protected. The social stigma like child marriage, female foeticide, child abuse and child prostitution must be eradicated immediately.

## **Education and Women Empowerment**

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. For enhancing women education our government has taken many steps. There are constitutional provisions for women education. The Constitution of India in Article 15(1) on right to equality provides the basic policy framework the enshrines the vision of girls education and the spirit in which their education is to be provided in the National Policy on education 1986, (as modified in 1992) a new thrust was provided to girl's education, which provided a holistic vision for education of women and girls. There are some new initiatives for promoting girl's education i.e. Mahila Samakhya started in 1989, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), National Programme for education of girls at elementary level (NPEGEL), Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) scheme was launched by the government of India in August 2004. Education provides financial and economic security to a woman and with that she can prove her worthiness. Education helps in the mental development of the women and a mentally satisfied and contented woman is an asset to a family. Women empowerment is possible with education as it helps her become socially, economically, politically, culturally and morally strong.

## **Role of NGO's in Women Empowerment**

Governmental Organizations are formal agencies working for the empowerment of women. But this work requires multidimensional approach and hence a large number of voluntary organizations/ NGO's have gained increased attention in the field from grass-root level to national & international level. Their role is so impressive because they work with

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missionary zeal and commitment. The working style of NGO's is open, transparent and personal. So, they are more effective in this direction. They organize seminars, conferences and workshops for the awakening of the masses. Their mass appeal – style contributes to a better understanding of women rights and of the means to ensure the enjoyment of those rights and 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.

### **Conclusion**

The empowerment of women has become one of the most important concerns of 21 st century not only at national level but also at the international level. Efforts by the Govt. are to ensure gender equality but 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 the social, political and economic life of the country with a sense of equality. Then only the Vedic verse “Wherever Women is respected, God resides there” should come true.

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