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Women Empowerment in India: Concept and Reality

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The term 'empowerment' is a multi-dimensional and multi-faceted concept that is affecting the thinkers, policy-makers and people all around the world. The origin of this concept is go back to the civil rights movement in the USA in the 1960s. It has since then been interoperated differently and filled with new meaning and is today used in such different sectors like business, social work, development discourse and by advocates of very different political agenda. As Batliwala defines empowerment as a process of enabling or authorizing individual to think, take action and control work in an autonomous way. It is the process by which one can gain control over one's destiny and the circumstances of one's lives. Empowerment includes control over resources (physical, human, intellectual, and financial) and over ideology (beliefs, values, and attitudes). It is not merely a feel of greater extrinsic control, but also grows intrinsic capacity, greater self-confidence and an internal transformation of one's consciousness that enable one to overcome external barriers, to accessing resources or changing traditional ideology.

Keywords: Empowerment, Co-operation, Participation, Violence

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ⁱ Rahman argues that empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation to greater decision-making power and control, and to transformative action. In addition it is a process that is both individual and collective. Sometime it involves people as groups that most often begin to develop their awareness and the ability to organize to take action and bring about change.ⁱⁱ Similarly the word ‘women empowerment’ has become one of the most important concerns of 21st century not only at national level but also at the international level. 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 organizations, perhaps more as a means to achieve gender equality than as an end itself. According to Singh and Gupta, women empowerment generally has these main components; firstly, women’s sense of self-worth; secondly, their right to have the power of control their own lives both within and outside the home; and lastly, their ability to influence the direction on social change to create a just social and economic order nationally, internationally and universally.ⁱⁱⁱ

Women empowerment is necessary for a balanced development, not only sociologically but also mathematically as the constitute fifty percent of the human race, it is imperative that every section of the society develops equally and in harming with each other. The status of women in India has been a subject to many great changes over the past few millenniums. In early Vedic period, women enjoyed equal status with men. Rig-Veda, and Upanishads mention several names of women sages and seers notably Gargi, Maitri. During the medieval period, the position of Indian women in the further deteriorated. Among some communities in India, practice of sati, child marriage, and a ban on re-marriages of widows become parts of social life. The muslim conquest brought purdah practice in the Indian society. The jauhar was practiced among the rajputs of Rajasthan. During and after British rule the condition of women was not good. But at the this time, many reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidhyasagar, Jyotirao Phule etc. struggled for the upliftment of the condition of women in India. In 1829, the efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy resulted in the abolition of the practice of ‘Sati’ under Governor- General William Bentick. The Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 was the result of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar’s movement for the improvement in the condition of widows.^{iv} After independence, India is free to take new and innovative steps for women empowerment. The Indian constitution guarantees about women equality, no discrimination, equality of opportunity, equal pay for equal work for all Indian women and it allows the state to make special provisions in favour of women and children. There are a number of schemes at present aiming at women empowerment and gender equality in India; Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) (1975), Rajiv Gandhi for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (RGSEAG) (2010), The Rajiv Gandhi

National Creche Scheme for Children of Working Mothers, Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women (STEP), Mahila Smridhi Yojna, Indira Gandhi Matruva Sahyog Yojna (IGMSY 2010), Women Helpline Scheme (2015), Beti Bachao Beti Pado (2015), UJJAWALA (2015), Mahila-E-Haat (2015) and many more. 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 was aimed at ensuring women empowerment through positive economic and social policies for the full development of women so that they could realize their full potential. The establishment of National Women's Commission and State Women's Commission were important milestones in the direction of women empowerment in India.^v

Problems faced by women

In spite of the effective implementations of all the above schemes and programmes, there are significant gaps between policy achievement and actual practice at the community level. Today there are a lot of things that are happening in the name of women empowerment in India and a lot of resources are spent in this direction. Keeping this in mind it is crucial to have a reality check on what is happening on paper and what is the actual ground situation. The ground reality is deprivation, degradation and exploitation of women especially women from rural areas and those belonging to deprived sectors of the society. The intensity of exploitation and subjugation varies from society to society. But there is no such a society which has eliminated this exploitation. The patriarchal system has confined the women to specific areas such as kitchen and bedroom and fixed gender roles like bearing and rearing children, cooking, and cleaning. Even today a woman is viewed as "property" and not a human being who has her own likes and dislikes. Opportunities for self-development are denied to them.^{vi} By and large in the third world countries like, women are more likely to be poor and illiterate as compared to men. Not only that, they are also often a victim of traditional biases that give them little or no rights to property ownership, lack of education, employment, medical care and control over their own destinies. They are also often the victim of acute domestic violence. Domestic violence results into violation of human rights and economic costs. It leads to both short term and long term detrimental effects on the health and welfare of women and their children. Living with constant threat of domestic violence is, as considered by experts, acts as a source of disempowerment of women. Domestic violence takes the forms like emotional, physical and sexual violence by their husbands.^{vii} According to the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, cruelty by husband and relative continues to occupy the highest

share (34.6%) among the crimes committed against women in 2015 followed by ‘ assault on women with intent to outrage her modesty (25.2%), 10.6% of rape, 2.7% of insult to the modesty of women, and 3.0% of dowry prohibition act.^{viii} According to the Human Development Report 2013, India ranks 131 in 2016 among 188 countries in terms of Human Development Index. Nepal ranked 102nd and Bangladesh 111th. The report has observed that the persistent health, education and economic participation gaps are acting as detrimental forces to India’s growth. The report said that all countries in South Asia, with the exception of Afghanistan, were a better place for women than India. Early age marriages are still taking place in large numbers and the number of girls going to school is abysmally low. Moreover majority of the girls who join the school drop out by the age of puberty to get married and forced to live a life of drudgery. Noting that women, on an average, have lower HDI than men across the world, the report pointed out that the largest gender disparity in development was in South Asia, where the female HDI value is 20% lower than the male value.

In South Asia, gender gaps in entrepreneurship and labour force participation caused an estimated income loss of 19%. “Between their first and fifth birthdays, girls in India and Pakistan have a 30% to 50% greater chance of dying than boys,” the report noted.

While India’s HDI value increased from 0.428 in 1990 to 0.624 in 2015, it still had the lowest rank among BRIC nations. However, its average annual growth in HDI (1990-2015) was higher than that of other medium HD countries.^{ix} The Human Development Report-2016 observed that the population with at least secondary education was only 35.3% for females as against 61.4% for males. Female feticide and infanticide are starring the nation as one of the biggest social crisis. As per census 2016, the sex ratio is at national level, 943/1000, rural sex ratio is 949 and urban is 929. Another upsetting place still remains for Indian women is the negative sexual attention that women often receive. Indian societies have received unsavory reputation for being unsafe for women. Whereby the fair sex is not only being hassled, stalked and raped but incidents of immoral trafficking also are very high.^x

Measures to be taken

One of the major aspects of women empowerment in India is to change the attitude of society towards women. Women empowerment in India is a challenging task as we need to acknowledge the fact that gender based discrimination is a deep rooted social malice practiced in India in many forms since thousands of years. The problem is that the society never worked on the idea of gender equality of society towards women. Atrocities and discrimination against women is a way of daily

life in Indian society. Women have never been part of the mainstream society in India and they are still considered as a great liability. The problem in the country is serious about the women belonging to disadvantaged groups. The social activist should keep a vigil on the atrocities committed on women belonging to weaker sections and help them to fight the legal battle for obtaining justice. Society must take initiatives to create a climate in which there is no gender discrimination. Women's empowerment benefits the society at large and is the magic key to a family' as well as a nation's well being.

Education is a potent tool in the emancipation and empowerment of women. The greatest single factor which can incredibly improve the status of women in any society is education. It is indispensable that education enables women not only to gain more knowledge about the world but helps her to get status, positive self-esteem and self-confidence, necessary courage and inner strength to face the challenges in life, accessing information and tools of knowledge and acquiring the ability to negotiate this unequal and unjust world from position of strength. Apparently it also facilitates them to procure a job and supplement the income of family and achieve social status. Education, especially of women has a major impact on health and nutrition as an instrument of developing a sustainable strategy for population control. Moreover, educated women can play an equally important role as men in nation-building. No society has ever liberated itself economically, politically or socially without a sound base of educated women. Thus there is no denying fact that education empowers women. Indeed it is the reality that women's education as the basic step to attain equality with men.^{xi}

Political empowerment is necessary for their emancipation. In spite of reservation being granted to women in Panchayat elections after 73rd and 74th constitution amendment, in the male chauvinism does not allow them to function independently. Men largely dominate the political arena; largely formulate the rules of political game; and often define the standards for evaluation. The women's reservation policy bill is however a sad story as it is repeatedly being scuttled in parliament. Women's participation in politics requires some legislative compulsions for mending the working of political and social institutions, which if left to them are unlikely to change in favour of women. It thus calls for essentially an active participation of women in the decision making process. Empowerment of women through legislation then provides the women with a constitutional platform to stand up to men, to raise their voice on issues concerning women exploitation, and related issues and thus in effect providing them with an identity in an orthodox male dominated society, in addition to providing a much needed forum to seek solution redressal of problems directly affecting them; the true essence of women empowerment.^{xii}

One of the important ways of women empowerment is through inducting women in the mainstream of development. Women empowerment will be real and effective only when they are endowed income and property so that they may stand on their feet and build up their identity in the society. Development guarantees the abolition of the feeling of dominance and dependence. Amartya Sen taking a much wider view of development takes of development as the process of expansion of entitlement- i.e. giving life sustenance and self esteem- and capabilities. Development improves the quality of life through the process of expansion, ensures freedom from hunger, exploitation, discrimination and oppression and also imparts a sense of self- belief and provides the strength to stand up against violence. Women's participation in the development process provides them employment opportunities and opportunity to get out of clutches of poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy etc. Economic independence imbibes confidence and the strength to stand up and think about their future.^{xiii}

Governmental organizations are formal agencies working for the empowerment of women. But this work requires multidimensional approach and hence a large number of NGOs have gained increased attention in the field from grass-root level to national and international level. Their role is so remarkable because they work with missionary enthusiasm and commitment. The working style of NGO's is open, transparent. So, they are more effective in this direction. They are playing an impressive role in awakening of the masses through seminars, conferences and workshops. Their programs and functions contribute towards the realization of sustainable community development and hence women empowerment. Besides the NGOs, the agencies of UN actively promotes women's human rights and works to eradicate, discourage of violence against working for the employment of women like the Commission on the Status of Women UN Women, the Committee on the elimination of discrimination against women, the United Nations Development Fund for Women etc. These international organizations work to ensure that women have a real voice in all government institutions.

Besides these measures, steps should 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.

Conclusion

To conclude it might be said that women empowerment has become one of the most important concern of 21st century not only at national level but also at the international level. Though the government of India has enacted many constitutional and legislative provisions for empowerment of women, but the condition of women in our country is still leaves much to be desired. Awareness programs need to be organized for creating awareness among women especially belonging to the weaker sections of the society. 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 feticide, and child abuse and child prostitution must be eradicated immediately. Society must take initiative to create a climate in which there is no gender discrimination and women have full opportunities to self-decision making and participate in the social, political, and economic life of the country with a sense of equality. First and foremost priority should be given to the education of women, which is the grass root problem. Education for women has to be paid special attention because education is a powerful tool of social transformation.

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