



## WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

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### **Abstract**

*The Empowerment of Women has become one of the most important Concerns of 21<sup>st</sup> century not only at national level but also at the international level. Efforts by the Government are on 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.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Women constitute almost 50% of the world's population but India has shown disproportionate sex ratio whereby female's population has been comparatively lower than males. As far as their social status is concerned, they are not treated as equal to men in all the places. In the Western societies, the women have got equal right and status with men in all walks of life. But gender disabilities and discriminations are found in India even today. The paradoxical situation has such that she was sometimes concerned as Goddess and at other times merely as slave.

### **WOMEN IN INDIA**

Now the women in India enjoy a unique status of equality with the men as per constitutional and legal provision. But the Indian women have come a long way to achieve the present positions. First, gender inequality in India can be traced back to the historic days of Mahabharata when Draupadi was put on the dice by her husband 200 Dhruva Hazarika as a commodity. History is a witness that women were made to dance both in private and public places to please the man. Secondly, in Indian society, a female was always dependent on male members of the family even last few years ago. Thirdly, a female was not allowed to speak with loud voice in the presence of elder members of her in-laws. In the family, every faults had gone to her and responsible. Forth, as a widow her dependence on male members of the family still more increase. In many social activities she is not permitted to mix with other members of the family. Other hand, she has very little share in political, social and economic life of the society.

The early twenty century, it was rise of the National Movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi who was in favor of removing all the disabilities of women. At the same time, Raja Ram Mohan Rai, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and various other social reformers laid stress on women's education, prevention of child marriage, withdrawals of evil practice of sati, removal of polygamy etc. The National Movement and various reform movements paved the way for their liberations from the social evils and religious taboos. In this context, we may write about the Act of Sati (abolish) 1829, Hindu Widow Remarriage Act' 1856, the Child Restriction Act, 1929, Women Property Right Act, 1937 etc. After independence of India, the constitution makers and the national leaders recognized the equal social position of women with men. The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 has determined the age for marriage, provided for monogamy and guardianship of the mother and permitted the dissolution of marriage under specific circumstances. Under the Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act, 1956, an unmarried women, widow or divorce of sound mind can also take child in adoption. Similarly, the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 says that any person who gives, takes, or abets the giving or taking of dowry shall be punished with imprisonment, which may extend to six months or fine up to Rs.5000/ or with both.

The Constitution of India guarantees equality of sexes and in fact grants special favors to women. These can be found in three articles of the constitution. Article 14 says that the government shall not deny to any person equality before law or equal protection of the law. Article 15 declares that government shall not discriminate



against any citizen on the ground of sex Article 15 (3) makes a special provision enabling the state to make affirmative discriminations in favor of women. Article 42 directs the state to make provision for ensuring just and human conditions of work and maternity relief. Above all, the constitution regards a fundamental duty on every citizen through Articles 15 (A), (E) to renounce the practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

### **PROBLEMS RELATED TO WOMEN IN INDIA**

Many empirical studies have been conducted to assess the problems faced by women in and outside family and to know the quality of change in the status of women in India. Almost all studies reveal that sexism still prevails everywhere. Women often encounter prejudice, discrimination and abuse from both men and women both in the family and at workplace.

Almost daily we come across some or the other incident of dowry death, domestic violence, exploitation, rape cases, harassment, etc., reported in newspapers or magazines. Most of these incidents or accidents are reflection of the problems still faced by women in India.

Apparently, women are now fully emancipated and free to choose their profession, life partner and the way of life. But, the fundamentally deep-rooted feeling of inequality and discrimination still persists due to domineering attitudes of males and the age-old customs and traditions.

A few urban educated women may look upon themselves as emancipated, enlightened and progressive. They may ape the western way of life but the deep-rooted inhibitions and age-old restraints always cram their mind. In public women might get a lot of lip respect, especially on 'women's day' or 'mother's day,' but at home their equal rights and privileges are a mere myth.

Most husbands and fathers took upon their wives and daughters as their own possessions. Obedience to her husband is still expected from a good Hindu wife even in the so-called well-educated families. True and full expression of her individuality, unfettered by restraints, is unheard of.

The normal Indian wife's thinking is conditioned in such a manner that she cheerfully accepts any amount of domination. She takes it for granted that her likes and dislikes, her wishes and ideas will never be placed on the same level as her husband.

Working wives are however treated with a little more respect and consideration. Economic dependence of Indian women on her husband's has kept them in a state of perpetual bondage. This is the crux of the whole problem of Indian women.

The condition of women narrated above is still true for rural India. Exploitation of women in the countryside still prevails. She is still identified as a daughter, daughter-in-law, mother, mother-in-law, wife, etc., and not as a person. She has no independent connections, friends and relatives outside the family.

Earlier sociologists stressed that a change in the structure of the family, e.g., from joint to nuclear, would automatically lead to a change in the status of women. But it has not come true. It is a very simplistic approach because the socialization of a woman ensures that she remains in a subordinate position irrespective of family structure. Hence, the institutions of family and marriage both need a reorientation.

To conclude, it may be said that considering the long history of suppression of women under patriarchy, women seem to be on the path to empowerment although at a slower pace. The fact that women come forward to contest elections for various civic bodies from panchayat to parliament and hold positions in these bodies and work as



Collector, Chief Secretary, I.G., Professor, Vice-Chancellor, engineers, doctors, business and bank executives, pilots and many other responsible posts is itself a step on the road to empowerment.

In raising the issue of women's autonomy and right to go out to work, they challenged entrenched gender roles, and even suggested that not getting married might be valid choice for women. Christensen, President, National Council of Family Relations once remarked that sex has suffered much from giving married women complete equality with their husbands.

It has encouraged her to become more aggressive and hence more masculine. Furthermore, she sometimes has confused equality with identity, and in her effort to be equal with man she has tried to copy man-in dress, mannerisms, even vulgarities. At the same time, man has tended to soften both because of women's inroads and because of the comforts of modern culture which means that he is becoming less masculine.' Women's equality with man in this sense is harming sex. And, there is a growing tendency to love things more than people.

### **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 the women in the form of increased self esteem and sense of agency.

### **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, Rajaram mohan Rai, Ishwarchandra Vidya Sagar, 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). 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.



## **EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA**

The concept of empowerment flows from the power. It is vesting where it does not exist or exist inadequately. Empowerment of women would mean equipping women to be economically independent, self-reliant, have positive esteem to enable them to face any difficult situation and they should be able to participate in development activities. The empowered women should be able to participate in the process of decision making. In India, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD-1985) and the National Commission for Women (NCW) have been worked to safeguard the rights and legal entitlement of women. The 73<sup>rd</sup> & 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments (1993) to the constitution of India have provided some special powers to women that for reservation of seats (33%), whereas the report HRD as March 2002 shows that the legislatures with the highest percentage of women are Sweden 42.7%, Denmark 38%, Finland 36% and Iceland 34.9%. In India “The New Panchayati Raj” is the part of the effort to empower women at least at the village level. The government of India has ratified various international conventions and human rights instruments committing to secure equal rights to women. These are CEDAW (1993), the Mexico Plan of Action (1975), the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (1985), the Beijing Declaration as well as the platform for Action (1995) and other such instruments. The year of 2001 was observed as the year of women’s empowerment. During the year, a landmark document has been adopted, ‘the National Policy for the empowerment of women.’ For the beneficiaries of the women, the government has been adopted different schemes and programs i.e. the National Credit Fund for Women (1993), Food and Nutrition Board (FNB), Information and Mass Education (IMF) etc.

The most positive development last few years has been the growing involvement of women in the Panchayati Raj institutions. There are many elected women representatives at the village council level. At present all over India, there are total 20, 56, 882 laces Gaon panchayat members, out of this women members is 8, 38, 244 (40.48%), while total Anchalik panchayat members is 1, 09, 324, out of this women members is 47, 455, (40.41%) and total Zila porisod members is 11, 708, out of this women members is 4, 923 (42.05%). At the central and state levels too women are progressively making a difference. Today we have seen women chief ministers, women president, different political parties leader, well establish businessmen etc.

The most notable amongst these are Mrs. Protiva Devi Singh Patil, Shila Dexit, Mayawati, Sonia Gandhi, Binda karat, Nazma Heptulla, Indira Nuye (pepsi-co), BJP eader Susma Sivaraj, railway minister Momta Benarji, ‘Narmada Basao’ leader Medhapatkar, Indi and Iron Woman, EX-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi etc. Women are also involving in human development issues of child rearing, education, health, and gender parity. Many of them have gone into the making and marketing of a range of cottage products-pickles, tailoring, embroidery etc. The economic empowerment of women is being regarded these days as a sine-quo-non of progress for a country; hence, the issue of economic empowerment of women is of paramount importance to political thinkers, social thinkers and reformers.

## **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 Principles. The various articles mentioned in the earlier paragraph are meant for ensuring gender equality. 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 when under the Priministership of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, a scheme known as Indira Mahila Yojana was launched and UNDP also incorporated issues of women upliftment as Primary objective. Various Schemes were later on 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 was aimed at ensuring women empowerment through positive economic and social policies for the full development of women. The policy assured equal access to women to health care, quality education, participation and decision making in Social, Political and Economic life of the nation.

The National Policy also aims at strengthening legal system for eliminating discrimination against Women. It also visualizes strengthening partnership with Civil Society, particularly Women's organizations. States have also taken various measures for empowerment of women.

### **WHY IS THERE STILL A NEED FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT?**

In spite 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 offices of President, Prime Minister, Lok Sabha Speaker, Leader of the Opposition or women like Ms. Chandra Kochar 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 male female ratio though improved over last few years is still far from satisfactory. It is 940 women per 1000 men for India in some states it is as much lower as 877. These are the states where female foeticide is maximum. The female literacy rate is also lower than the male literacy rate.

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. Dr. Dashrath Bhuyan in his article titled "Empowerment of Indian Women : A challenge of 21<sup>st</sup> century" writes "Women are being brutalized, Commodified, materialized and subjected to inhuman exploitation and discrimination" In spite of reservation being granted to women in Panchayat elections after 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitution amendment, in many Panchayats the male Chauvinism does not allow them to function independently.

### **GLOBALIZATION**

Globalization has presented new challenges for the realization of the goal of women's equality, the gender impact of which has not been systematically evaluated fully. However, from the micro-level studies that were commissioned by the Department of Women & Child Development, it is evident that there is a need for re-framing policies for access to employment and quality of employment. Benefits of the growing global economy have been unevenly distributed leading to wider economic disparities, the feminization of poverty, increased gender inequality through often deteriorating working conditions and unsafe working environment especially in the informal economy and rural areas. Strategies will be designed to enhance the capacity of women and empower them to meet the negative social and economic impacts, which may flow from the globalization process.

### **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. A programme for checking the spread of sexually transmitted diseases like HIV / AIDS and infections / communicable diseases like T.B. needs to be launched.

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.





The problem in the country is serious about the women belonging to disadvantaged groups. They are the most exploited lot. 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. Schemes need to be introduced for helping women who are victims of marital violence, who are deserted and those engaged in sex professions.

Awareness programmes need to be organized for creating awareness among women especially belonging to weaker sections 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.

### **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 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'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.

### **ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL AGENCIES: FOR 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.

### **MORE STEPS TO BE TAKEN**

There cannot be any dramatic movement in the system just by including women members in Gram Panchayat. At the same time, it is also essential to shed certain stereotyped prevailing notions about role and importance of women in socio-economic development. Women should be encouraged to play a more active part. The male representatives have to establish a rapport with female representatives and give due respect and attention to their views. In the process of development and decision-making, women have to operate along with men.



Of course, there is some awareness among women due to reservation for them in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). But there is need for appropriate training and education relating to different aspects in functioning of Panchayats to make women members conscious enough about their effective role and representation in the Panchayat Samiti. This kind of training can be organized at the district or block level immediately following the election. We have to understand that women representatives can play a vital role in the formulation and implementation of various women and child development programmes. This would increase the efficacy of such programmes. For instance, the women representatives and Gram Panchayat should have sufficient control over the primary education, primary health care and running of the public distribution system.

The state must pass and enforce legislation so that the status of women in society is brought to a respectable level through the long arms of the law. In 1985, a separate department of Women and Child Development was set up. In the Sixth Five Year plan, a separate chapter on Women and Development was included. The government had started and implemented major programmes like Support to Training-cum- Employment for Women (STEP), Mahilakosh, Womens Development Corporation, etc. However, legislations and efforts of the state have not made deeper in-roads into the rural and urban areas. For example, sex determination of foetus still continues in all the rural regions of the country despite the enforcement of legislation on Pre-natal Diagnostic Technique (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act, which was passed in 1994. The women of India must oppose this sex determination of foetus, eve-teasing, bride burning, child marriage, exploitation in the offices, lower wages for labour etc. women from all walks of life must unite and must give priority to their education, growth and the prosperity of their families. Police should accept more female officers and constables so that they are able to deal with the female victims of our society. Female infanticide, female torture, Sati and dowry must be banned in the country.

Women must become literate, as education is beneficial for them as well as their families. The family web is woven around the women. She has to be up to the mark and educated so that she could fend for herself and her family during the hour of crisis. The status of women would improve only if they educate themselves and grab every opportunity to become stronger and more powerful than before.

The discussion brings a major conclusion to light-the status of women could be improved by women themselves and nobody else. It is the modern era of satellites, achievements and technology-based gadget. Why should women be left behind?

There should be a better and fuller understanding of the problems peculiar to woman, to make a solution of those problems possible. As these problems centre round the basic problem of inequality, steps should be taken to promote equality of treatment and full integration of woman in the total development effort of the country.

The main stress should be on equal work and elimination of discrimination in employment. One of the basic policy objectives should be universal education of woman, the lack of which tends to perpetuate the unequal status quo. The popular UNESCO slogan should come in handy: educate a man and you educate an individual; educate a woman and you educate a family.

Women will have to empower themselves from below in order to compel the government to empower them from above. Further, there is a need for a change of values and behavior in the society, a need for positive socio-cultural and economic empowerment and above all the will power and strong determination of women to join politics. Education can play a vital role in bringing about the desirable behavioral changes among the women and make them well equipped in terms of knowledge, competence and capacity to deal with different political problems.



It may be concluded that women have shifted traditional assumptions about their roles and capabilities. There has been a marked change, and it has been for the better. Many of its benefits however have yet to touch the majority and all of us continue to experience various forms of gender discrimination. If laws designed to address the concerns of women are to have a dramatic and positive impact on women's lives, they must be sensitive to the social, economic and political disempowerment of women throughout the world.

The most important measure of their success should be the extent to which they enable woman to interpret, apply and enforce laws of their own making, incorporating their own voices, values and concerns.

## **CONCLUSION**

Today we have noticed different Acts and Schemes of the central government as well as state government to empower the women of India. But in India 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 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.