

## WOMEN EMPOWERMENT- CHANGING THE PERCEPTION OF THE WHOLE SOCIETY

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### **Abstract:**

“When women move forward, the family moves, the village moves and the nation moves” words of Jawaharlal Nehru about the status of women that is closely associated with their economic position, which in turn depends upon their access to productive resources of the country and the opportunities for participation in socio-economic activities. Women constitute half of the world’s population and contribute substantially to the all round development of the world. However, majority of them are the poor, oppressed, under privileged and discriminated. A review of government's various programmes for women empowerment such as Swashakti, Swayamsidha, Streeshakti, Balika samrudhi yojana and another two thousand projects reveal that little has been done or achieved through these programmes. The discrepancy in the ideology and practice of the empowerment policy of women in India constitutes its continued social, economic and social backwardness. Women make up 52% of our country's population. Hence there can be no progress unless their needs and interests are fully met. Empowerment would not hold any meaning unless they are made strong, alert and aware of their equal status in the society. Policies should be framed to bring them into the mainstream of society. There is no doubt about the fact that development of women has always been the central focus of planning since Independence. Empowerment is a major step in this direction but it has to be seen in a relational context. A clear vision is needed to remove the obstacles to the path of women's emancipation both from the government and women themselves. Efforts should be directed towards all round development of each and every section of Indian women by giving them their due share.

**Key words-** empowerment, intellectual, privileged, discrepancy

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**Introduction:**

Mayoux's (2000) definition of empowerment relates "a multidimensional and interlinked process of change in power relations". It consists of: (1) 'Power within', enabling women to articulate their own aspirations and strategies for change; (2) 'Power to', enabling women to develop the necessary skills and access the necessary resources to achieve their aspirations; (3) 'Power with', enabling women to examine and articulate their collective interests, to organize, to achieve them and to link with other women and men's organizations for change; and (4) 'Power over', changing the underlying inequalities in power and resources that constrain women's aspirations and their ability to achieve them. These power relations operate in different spheres of life (e.g., economic, social, political) and at different levels (e.g., individual, household, community, market, institutional).

In a globalizing world, gender equality and empowerment of women are vital tools-to achieve sustainable developments of societies. In the present scenario, where phenomenal advancements are occurring in each and every sphere, women empowerment has become crucial for alleviating poverty and procuring overall growth. Women's rights and issues have always been a subject of serious concern of academicians, intelligentsia and policy makers. From pastoral society to contemporary information and global society, the role of women has changed drastically. The role of a typical "Grihani" (House wife) who catered to all the requirements of the households including the rearing and upbringing of children in various sub roles of daughter, daughter-in-law, wife, mother, aunt etc. has been played quite efficiently. The continuity of changes in socio-economic and psycho-cultural aspects of human living has influenced the role of women. With the process of Industrialization, Modernization and Globalization showing its deep impact on the human society all over the world, the role and responsibilities of women has attained new definition and perspective.

The women issues have received tremendous attention in the planning circle and in wide intellectual discussions and forums at national and global platforms. However the existing lacuna in the formulation and execution of the policies has not changed the grass root situation to a great extent. In the context of women, empowerment is referred as a process whereby women become able to organize themselves to increase self-reliance, to assert their independent right, to make choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination.

Women empowerment is a stage of acquiring power for women in order to understand her rights and to perform her responsibilities towards oneself and others in a most effective way.

Empowerment of women is aimed at striving towards acquisition of the following:

- Higher literacy level and education,
- Better health care for her and her children,
- Equal ownership of productive resources,
- Increased participation in economic and commercial sectors,
- Awareness of their rights,
- Improved standard of living,
- Achieve self-reliance, self-confidence and self-respect amongst women.

Empowerment of women would mean equipping women to be economically independent and personally self-reliant, with a positive self-esteem to enable them to face any difficult situation. Moreover they should be able to contribute to the developmental activities of the country. The empowered women should be able to participate in the process of decision-making. Women empowerment is a dynamic process that consists of an awareness-attainment-actualization cycle. Again, it is a growth process that involves intellectual enlightenment, economic enrichment and social emancipation on the part of women.

Women empowerment aims enabling them to realize their identity, potentiality and power in all spheres of their lives. It has mainly five dimensions viz., economic, political, social/cultural, personal and familial. Each dimension is very important because the real empowerment of women is possible only when a woman has increased access to economic resources, more strength and courage for entering into the power structure, more involvement through social/cultural relationships and participation, more self-motivation and confidence, and more say in the family matters.

### **Objectives:**

The main objectives of the present study are to:

1. Examine the status and trend of women empowerment in India in terms of various indicators such as economic participation, political participation, access to education etc.

2. Explore the link between various dimensions of women empowerment with human development.
3. Identify the hidden constraints on women empowerment
4. Suggest measures to bridge the gap between men and women.

### **Review of literature:**

The World Bank's Empowerment and Poverty Reduction: A Sourcebook defines empowerment in its broadest sense as the "expansion of freedom of choice and action" (Narayan, 2002). United Nations (2001) defines empowerment as the processes by which women take control and ownership of their lives through expansion of their choices. Kabeer's (1998, 1999) view of empowerment refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such ability. The fundamentals of empowerment have been defined as agency (the ability to define one's goals and act upon them), awareness of gendered power structures, self-esteem and self-confidence (Kabeer 2001). Mayoux's (2000) definition of empowerment relates more directly with power, as "a multidimensional and interlinked process of change in power relations". Women's groups have emerged as a dynamic, articulate constituency enabling women to work together in collective agency (Krishna raj and Kay 2002). Human development has been defined as the process of "enlarging the range of people's choices." [UNDP 1990:10]. An acquisition of knowledge, the need to lead a long and healthy life and the need to have an access to the resources required for a decent standard of living have been identified as three essential choices for the attainment of human development. Although the process of empowerment depends on women themselves involving consciousness raising, participation, and organizing themselves, it can also be facilitated through education, capacity building, training and other measures. Change has to happen in the structures and legal frameworks (family laws, property rights, etc) in order to make the self-transformation process of empowerment sustainable (Kabeer, 2001, and World Bank 2001).

### **Indicators of Women Empowerment:**

There are several indicators of women empowerment. For the sake of convenience these can be classified in to three categories.

- **At the Individual Level**

- a) Participation in crucial decision-making process
- b) Improved health & nutrition conditions
- c) Extent to which women take control of their reproductive functions and decide on the family size
- d) Extent of sharing domestic work by men
- E) Extent to which a women is able to decide where income she has earned will be channeled to
- f) Feeling and expression of pride and value in her work
- g) Self-confidence and self-esteem
- h) Ability to prevent violence.

- **At the Community Level**

- a) Existence of women organizations
- b) Allocation of funds to women related development projects
- c) Increased number of women leaders, at village, district and national levels
- d) Involvement of women in the designing development tool and application of appropriate technology
- e) Increased participation in community programmes, productive enterprises, policies
- f) Involvement of women in not traditional tasks
- g) Increased training programmes for women
- h) Exercising her legal rights when necessary.

- **At the national level**

- a) Awareness of her social and political rights
- b) Integration of women in the general and national development plans

- c) Existence of women network and publication
- d) Extent to which women are officially visible is recognized.

### Indian Scenario:

The status of women in India has been undergoing a sea-change. Supported by Constitutional guarantees to ensure dignity and equal opportunities, their active participation in all walks of life including education, politics, sport etc., has been growing. Taking note of women's role in the nation-building activities, the Government had declared 2001 as the year of Women's Empowerment by adopting a National Policy to offer "Swashakti" to women. Several laws have also been adopted to empower women socially, economically, legally and politically. Considering the role of rural India, the country's backbone, the Government had taken several measures to strengthen Panchayati Raj system with the active participation of women. This gave a boost to increase the number of women being elected to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies, an indication to suggest their political empowerment. A review of government's various programmes for women empowerment such as Swashakti, Swayamsidha, Stree Shakti, Balika samrudhi yojana and another two thousand projects reveal that little has been done or achieved through these programmes.

The status of women empowerment in India using various indicators like women's household decision making power, financial autonomy, freedom of movement, political participation, acceptance of unequal gender role, exposure to media, access to education, experience of domestic violence etc based on data from different sources. Gender gap exists regarding access to education and employment. Household decision-making power and freedom of movement of women vary considerably with their age, education and employment status. Different non-profit organizations have been brought to India from around the globe. These organizations have given women the skills they need to advance, such as literacy and vocational skills. Globalization has opened up broader communication lines and brought more companies as well as different worldwide organizations into India. This provides opportunities with new jobs for women, there are opportunities for higher pay, which raises self-confidence and brings about independence. This, in turn, can promote equality between the sexes, something that Indian women have been struggling with their entire lives. The expansion in the range of potential choices available to women includes three inter-related dimensions that are inseparable in determining the meaning of

an indicator and hence its validity as a measure of empowerment. These dimensions are (1) Resources: The pre-condition necessary for women to be able to exercise choice; women must have access and future claims to material, human and social resources; (2) Agency: The process of decision-making, including negotiation, deception and manipulation that permit women to define their Goals and act upon them; (3) Achievements: The well-being outcomes that women experience as a result of access to resources and agency. The table below shows the progress of women to understand women empowerment in her all walks of life.

TABLE -1

Progress of Indian Women, 2008						
Development Indicators	Women	Men	Total	Women	Men	Total
<b>* Demography</b>						
- Population(in million in 1971 & 2001)	264.10	284.00	548.10	<b>495.90</b>	<b>531.20</b>	1027.10
- Decennial Growth (1971 & 2001)	24.90	24.40	24.65	21.70	20.90	21.30
<b>* Vital Statistics</b>						
- Sex Ratio (1971 & 2001)	930		-	933		
Expectation of Life at Birth (1971 & 2001-06)	50.20	50.50	50.90	66.91	63.87	
- Mean Age at Marriage (1971 & 1991)	17.20	22.40	-	19.30	23.90	
<b>* Health and Family Welfare</b>						
- Birth Rate (1971 & 2008)			36.90			22.80
- Death Rate (1970 & 2008)	15.60	15.80	15.70	6.80	8.00	7.4
Infant Mortality Rate (1978 & 2008) Per 1000 live births	131.00	123.00	127.00	55.00	52.00	53.00
- Child Death Rate (2007) (0-4 years)				16.90	15.20	16.00
(2007) (5-14 years)				1.20	1.10	1.20
- Maternal Mortality Rate (1980 & 2006)	468.00			254.00		
<b>* Literacy and Education</b>						

- Literacy Rates (1971 & 2001)	7.90	24.90	16.7	54.28	75.96	65.38
Gross Enrolment Ratio (1990-91 & 2006-07) (%)						
Classes I-V	85.50	113.90	100.1	107.80	114.40	111.2
Classes VI-VIII	47.80	76.60	62.10	69.50	77.40	73.60
Drop-out Rate (1990-91 & 2006-07) (%)						
Classes I-V	46.00	40.10	42.60	26.60	24.40	25.4
Classes I-VIII				45.30	46.60	46.0





Table (Contd.)

<b>Development Indicators</b>						
<b>* Work and Employment</b>						
- Work Participation Rate (1971 & 2001) (%)	Women	Men	Total	Women	Men	Total
- Organized Sector	14.2	52.8	34.3	25.68	51.93	39.26
(No. in lakhs in 1971 & 2006)	19.3 (11%)	155.6	174.9	51.21 (19%)	218.72	269.93
- Public Sector	8.6	98.7	107.3	30.03	151.85	181.88
(No. in lakhs in 1971 & 2006)	(8%)			(16.51%)		
<b>* Decision Making</b>						
<b>- Administrative</b>						
IAS (2002 & 2006)	535 (10.4%)	4624	5159	571 (11.9%)	4219	4790
IPS (2005 & 2006)	142 (4.4%)	3056	3198	150 (4.7%)	3059	3209
<b>- Political</b>						
PRIs (No. in lakhs in 1997 & 2009)	8.14 (31.3%)	17.84	25.98	10.38 (36.83)	17.79	28.18
Legislative Assemblies (No. in 1985 & 2000)	141 (5.1%)	2632	2773	229 (5.6%)	3838	4067
Parliament (No. in 1989 & 2009)	47 (61%)	721	768	80 (10.12%)	710	790

**Notes:** @ Refers to 1995 in respect of only 9 States viz. Gujarat, Haryana, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan, Tripura and West Bengal.  
Figure in parentheses indicate the percentage in the total and year of the data in respective columns.  
Data from Planning Commission.  
**Source:** India, Ministry of Human Resource Development, Department of Women and Child Development. (2001). Working Group on Empowerment of Women: Tenth Plan (2002-07): Report. New Delhi. p.43.  
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### Challenges Ahead:

- It is the fact that things are not going to change overnight but because of this we cannot stop taking action either. At this juncture the most important step is to initiate ground level actions however small it might seem. The ground level actions should be focused towards changing the social attitude and practices prevalent in the society which are highly biased against women. This can be initiated by working with the women at the root level and focusing on increasing women's access and control over resources and increasing their control over decision making.
- Empowerment of women is a gradual and complicated process. It involves changing the way of thinking of the whole society. From long time it has been stamped on the minds of the people that women are inferior to men. It is not easy to change the stubborn attitude of the people. In rural India, Women have inadequate access to education, health facilities, healthy diet etc.
- In India gradually the percentage of working women is rising. Only by contributing towards income of the family the women can get rid of the status of "burden". Entrepreneur women can positively contribute to attain the goal of women empowerment. Such women can be given training in a specific field like making homemade papads or pickles, handicrafts and many such things and can start their own small enterprise. Self-employment is a blessing for poor and deserving women as sufficient job opportunities are not available in the country.
- Gender based discrimination is a deep rooted social malice practiced in India in many forms since thousands of years. The malice is not going to go away in a few years or for that matter by attempting to work at it through half-hearted attempts. Formulating laws and policies are not enough as it is seen that most of the times these laws and policies just remain on paper. The ground situation on the other hand just remains the same and in many instances worsens further. Addressing the malice of gender discrimination and women empowerment in India is long drawn battle against powerful structural forces of the society which are against women's growth and development.
- In India the most important aspect that comes into the mind is the attitude of the society towards women. Women are still considered as burden and liabilities. They are also considered as properties. These kinds of attitudes give birth to the evil of violence against

women. Women empowerment in India is not possible unless violence against women is eradicated from the society. Gender sensitization and gender training is primary need of the hour. The struggle of gender equality should be carried at every level and it should overcome the barriers of caste, class, race and religion.

- Women's empowerment cannot take place unless women come together and decide to self-empower themselves. Self empowerment should be all round in nature. Once this happens then we can think about galvanizing the system towards the direction of better health facilities, nutrition and educational facilities for women at a very large scale. Self empowerment can begin by addressing day to day issues faced by individual women and tackling them with a mindset of improving the overall living conditions of women at every level and strata of the society. A movement has to be build which awakens the individual self in each and every woman for creative and generative action. In this regard progressive and resourceful women in the society need to come forward to help their less privileged sisters in as many ways as possible. This shall help us sow the seed for real women empowerment in India.

### **Conclusion:**

Empowerment would become more relevant if women are educated, better informed and can take rational decisions. The situation of women and girl child is improving in India. The government of India is making umpteen efforts to uplift the girl child. The education for girl child is free till high school and particularly in capital region the state government pays a certain amount to the parents of girl child in lower strata of society for their upbringing. Still we cannot talk of women empowerment when cases of violence against women are rampant everywhere. Society needs to change itself and the way it thinks. What needs to begin is a movement to empower the girl child from the very beginning of her existence. Her upbringing needs to be changed. She cannot be brought up in an environment where women are taught to remain subdued; their aspirations cannot be curbed because they are females, they cannot be ignored. The girl child needs to grow learning that she is no less than her brother. She needs to know that a wide range of avenues wait for her to be explored in this world of hi tech lifestyle. The urban India has already tasted this change, but the situation has to be improved in rural parts which

constitutes the major part of our population. The government and NGOs are doing their very best to bring out changes in these areas. Women empowerment drives and initiatives will continue and some will do wonders in achieving their goals. But the real difference will come only once the foundation of our society undergoes dramatic transformation.

The discrepancy in the ideology and practice of the empowerment policy of women in India constitutes its continued social, economic and social backwardness. Women make up 52% of our country's population. Hence there can be no progress unless their needs and interests are fully met. Empowerment would not hold any meaning unless they are made strong, alert and aware of their equal status in the society. Policies should be framed to bring them into the mainstream of society.

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