

Women's Empowerment : A Conceptual View

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ABSTRACT

Empowerment does not mean setting women against men. Empowerment is one of the most loosely used terms in the development lexicon, meaning different things to different people or more dangerously all things to all people. The parameters of empowerment are: building a positive self-image and self-confidence, developing the ability to think critically, building up group cohesion; fostering decision making and action, ensuring equal participation in the process of bringing about social change, encouraging group action in order to bring about change in the society and providing the wherewithal for economic independence. It means redistribution of work roles, redistributing their values to the changing world and attitudes and evolving new kinds of adjustments, understanding and trust with each other. Women's concerns have to be kept at the centre of public policy, developmental planning and governance, with recognition of their role as critical growth agents and as ambassadors of social change. Political parties have to realize that the issues pertaining to women are not issues to be dealt with separately by women only.

Introduction

No society can hope to achieve its developmental goals without addressing the critical issues affecting half its population. Enhancing the status of women in the society and empowering

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them as equal citizens should be the two issues of highest priority on the national agenda. The empowerment of women is one of the central issues in the process of development of countries all over the world. The International Women's Day celebrated on 8th March every year has become a day of demonstration for equal opportunity and solidarity. But the question arises how relevant is celebration of Women's Day in view of the fact that their position in the society has not changed much. They are still treated as the "weaker sex" who needs to be protected entire life - be it by their father, husband or son. The 'New Age Women' and the 'women of substance' in true terms are just words in books. According to Swami Vivekananda, "there is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of the women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on one wing." Therefore, women's empowerment plays a vital role in the progress of a family, community, nation and the as a whole.

The Concept of Women's Empowerment

During the decade of the 1990s issues of reproductive health and rights, violence against women and male responsibility for gender power relations became the centre of global and national debates on human rights and human development. There was increasing debate on gender inequalities where it was clearly recognized that in spite of decades of women's movements, labour for a majority of them fell into the informal economy and was still regarded as unpaid work and was being ignored (UNFPA, 2004). The World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna, 1993), the International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in 1994 and the Fourth World Conference on women held in Beijing in 1995 have been the landmarks and the largest platforms for discussions on gender issues. Of all these major conferences, it was in Cairo that for the first time a separate chapter on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment was included in the Plan Of Action (POA) documents. Srilatha Batliwala (2001) writes that the term

'empowerment' has become a stock-in-trade expression wherever in the world women's issues are being discussed. It is one of the most loosely used terms in the development lexicon, meaning different things to different people or more dangerously all things to all people. In her previous work, she had commented that the notion of empowerment was articulated first in 1985 by Development Alternatives with Women for New Era (DAWN). In order to have an understanding of the term 'women's empowerment', an understanding of the term empowerment is essential. The word 'empowerment' means 'giving power'. According to the International Encyclopedia (1999), power means having the capacity and the means to direct one's life towards desired social, political and economic goals or status. Therefore, women's empowerment means giving the capacity and means to direct women's life towards desired goals. Empowerment is about change in favour of those who previously exercised little control over their lives. Women, unfortunately, fall in the category of the unempowered. They have little control over their resources (financial, physical and human) or over ideology (beliefs, values and attitudes). Women can be empowered through collective reflection and decision-making. The parameters of empowerment are: building a positive self-image and self-confidence, developing the ability to think critically, building up group cohesion; fostering decision making and action, ensuring equal participation in the process of bringing about social change, encouraging group action in order to bring about change in the society and providing the wherewithal for economic independence (GOI, 1986). Empowerment does not mean setting women against men. Indeed it means making both men and women realize their changing roles and status and develop a consensus for harmonious living in the context of an egalitarian society. It means redistribution of work roles, redistributing their values to the changing world and attitudes and evolving new kinds of adjustments, understanding and trust with each other.

INDICATORS OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Talking about the indicators of empowerment, it must be remembered that because empowerment is a process, the indicators of empowerment change over time as the groups and individuals proceed in their respective empowerment processes. There may also be differences between individual women taking part in the same project. While developing indicators the different levels of empowerment - individual, group and societal/community - must also be kept in mind e.g., indicators of agency on an individual level is different from agency on group level. However, the indicators of women's empowerment can be classified into three categories.

A. At the Individual level:

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

B. At the Community level

- Existence of women organizations.
- Allocation of funds to women related development projects.
- Increased number of women leaders, at village, district and national levels.
- Involvement of women in the designing development tool and application of appropriate technology.
- Increased participation in community programmes, productive enterprises, policies and arts.

- Involvement of women in non-traditional tasks.
- Increased training programmes for women.
- Exercising her legal rights when necessary.

At the National level

- Awareness of her social and political rights.
- Integration of women in the general and national development plans.
- Existence of women's network and publication.
- Extent to which women are officially visible are recognized.

VARIOUS DIMENSIONS OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Economic Empowerment: A woman is said to be economically empowered when she gains power as a result of increased access to economic resources. The means of achieving economic empowerment are: increase in income, access to finance, ability to make decisions regarding the utilization of money/credit, etc.

Political Empowerment: A woman is said to be politically empowered when she has the awareness and power to act in accordance with the rights and rightful role of women in society and polity. The means of achieving political empowerment are: political awareness, participation in political activity, membership in political parties, position of power, etc.

Social/Cultural Empowerment: A woman is said to be socially/culturally empowered when has the power to participate in collective/cultural activities in the society. The means of achieving social/cultural empowerment are: social status, mingling with others, access to various organizations, social involvement, participation in cultural activities/seminars/competition, etc.

Personal Empowerment: A woman is said to be personally empowered, when she has the power to increase her own self-reliance and self-strength. The means of achieving personal

empowerment are: economic freedom, freedom of action, ability and involvement in decision making, self-esteem, gender equality, improvement in health and knowledge etc.

Familial Empowerment: A woman is said to have familial empowerment when she has the power to increase her own family welfare. The means of achieving familial empowerment are improved family income, support from the spouse, improvement in family relationship, education to children, medical care to family members, improvement in basic facilities and amenities, etc.

MEASURING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

There are generally two approaches in this respect— one is to approach empowerment as a set of elements where each element is to be measured, while the other treats it as a holistic process of gaining ownership and/or control over one's life and where the process as a whole is to be measured. Naturally and as argued, one should do both when trying to get a good picture of empowerment, but depending on the approach, the indicators will be different.

The World Bank document, authored by Malhotra *et al.*, reflects the bank's concern to arrive at methods to measure women's empowerment. It appreciates the importance of contextuality while arriving at indicators for measuring empowerment; however it cautions that one should be able to see internalized forms of subordination and not mistake them as empowerment. The authors have explained that women's empowerment needs to occur along the following dimensions: economic, socio-cultural, familial/interpersonal, legal, political and psychological. The document also makes a strong case for measuring the process of empowerment at two different points in time to arrive at the best possible estimates. At the same time for different dimensions of empowerment different time gaps may be required when the change should be measured. For example, while social and economic changes may take relatively

lesser time, say a few years, the time required for political change may be quite prolonged, running into decades. Qualitative methods are more appropriate for measuring such a process.

UNDP has developed a tool, 'Gender Empowerment Measure' (GEM) to measure empowerment. It focuses on participation, measuring gender inequality in key areas of economic and political participation and decision-making. GEM cannot, due to data limitations, capture other levels of empowerment but UNDP acknowledges that empowerment processes occur also on these levels.

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

The need for women's empowerment was felt in India long back. Mahatma Gandhi had announced at the Second Round Table Conference that his aim was to establish a political society in India in which women would enjoy the same rights as men. Historically the status of Indian women has been influenced by their past. There is evidence to show that women in the Vedic age got most honored positions in the society. They had the right to education and were free to remain unmarried and devote their whole life to the pursuit of knowledge and self realization. The married women performed all the works and sacrifices equally with their husbands. They were educated in various disciplines of knowledge such as astrology, geography, veterinary sciences and even in martial arts. There were instances of women taking part in wars and fights. They were highly respected within and outside home. Gradually due to several socio-political changes, especially during the middle age, the glorious status of women declined. The urge for equality on the part of Indian women started getting momentum during the colonial times. Noted social reformers and national leaders like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar made selfless efforts to create awareness among women about their status and were quite successful in removing various social evils such as *sati pratha*, child marriage, and

polygamy. They also encouraged widow remarriage and women education. The reformers were successful in creating a base for development of women and their strive for equality. In course of time Indian society got transformed from traditional to a modern one. Consequently women became more liberal and aware of various ways of life. Since they are quite capable of breaking the traditional barriers imposed by the society are now challenging the patriarchal system though in a limited scale.

Since independence, the government of India has been making various efforts to empower women. The country's concern in safeguarding the rights and privileges of women found its best expression in the Constitution of India, covering fundamental rights and the directive principles of state policy. Articles 14, 15, 15(3), 16, 39, 42, 51 (A) (e) contain various types of provisions for equal rights and opportunities for women in different spheres of life. The constitution (73 and 74 amendments) Act of 1992 provides that not less than one third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the SCs and STs) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Panchayat and Municipality shall be reserved for women.

Planning and Women's Empowerment

From the very beginning of Independent India's development planning process, one of the main issues has been that of providing equal status of women. While the thrust of the first four plans was on organizing various welfare activities and giving priority to women education. However the fifth and sixth plans witnessed the shift from "Welfare" to "Development" of women with thrust on health, education and employment of women. The stress of the seventh plan was on identifying and promoting beneficiary oriented programmes with a view to extending direct benefits to women. The Eight plan (1992—97) promised to ensure that benefits of development from different sectors do not by-pass women.

The ninth plan (1997—2002) made two significant changes in the strategy of planning for women. Firstly, “**empowerment of women**” became a primary objective and secondly the plan attempted “convergence of existing services” available in both women-specific and women related sectors.

The Tenth plan (2002—2007) has made a major commitment towards “empowering women as the agent of Socio-economic change and development”, based on the recommendation of **National Policy for Empowerment of Women**. For this purpose a Sector -specific 3-Fold Strategy has been adopted. They include:

- I. **Social Empowerment:** To create an enabling environment through various alternative developmental policies and programmes for development of women of women besides providing them easy and equal access to all the basic minimum services so as to enable them to realize their full potentials.
- II. **Economic Empowerment:** To ensure provision of training, employment and income-generation activities with both ‘forward’ and ‘backward’ linkages with the ultimate objective of making all potential women economically independent and self-reliant; and
- III. **Gender Justice:** To eliminate all forms of gender discrimination and thus, allow women to enjoy not only the de jure but also defacto rights and fundamental freedom at par in all the sphere Viz., Political, Economic, Social, Civil, Cultural etc.

The main task of the Eleventh Plan (2007—2012) is to ensure that women are at the centre stage of all the activities — economic, social and political. The crucial areas concerning themselves, to a large extent, suggest the thrust areas that are required to be kept in view in the Eleventh plan, while priority will continue to be laid on health, nutrition, education, income generating activities, relief and rehabilitation for women in

distress. Micro credit will be continued to remain the backbone of SHG finances and therefore will need to be strengthened and streamlined in the eleventh plan.

The National Commission for Women was set up in 1992 to protect and safeguard the rights of women. The activities of the Commission include receiving complaints or suo motto enquiring in cases of deprivation of rights of women, providing counseling, conducting Parivarik Lok Adalats and legal awareness programmes and organizing public hearings. The National Commission for Women being the nodal agency for protection of the rights of women needs to be strengthened.

The Ministry of Women and Child Development, as the nodal agency for all matters pertaining to welfare, development and empowerment of women, has evolved schemes and programmes for their benefit. These schemes are spread across a broader spectrum such as women's need for shelter, security, safety, legal aid, justice, information, maternal health, food, nutrition etc as well as their need for economic sustenance through skill development, education, and access to credit and marketing. The schemes of the Ministry like *Swashakti*, *Swayamsidha*, *STEP* and *Swawlamban* enable economic empowerment. Working Women Hostels and Creches provide support services. *Swadhar* and *Short Stay Homes* provide protection and rehabilitation to women in difficult circumstances. The Ministry also supports autonomous bodies like National Commission, Central Social Welfare Board and *Rashtriya Mahila Kosh* which work for the welfare and development of women.

Women's Empowerment: the Present Scenario It's a paradoxical situation in India today. On the one hand there are positive indicators of the improvement of the position of women in this country; especially since independence if we take into account the progress achieved in the field of literacy, higher education, rise in the percentage of women in professional fields,

legal status of women as reflected in the enactment of a series of legislations, such as prohibition of bigamy, right to divorce, right to share family property, constitutional provisions for free education for girls, maternity leave benefits, restrictions on women's employment for night shifts, right to judicial separation and maintenance, prohibition of Child Marriage Act, Civil Marriage Act, Widow Remarriage Act, besides reservation for women's representation in local bodies, employment and now the demand for 33 percent reservation for women in parliament obviously all these measures to indicate serious endeavours to raise status of women in this country.

But still women have not been resorted to the pedestal to which they belong. It is unfortunate that even today social evils like dowry, child marriages, female infanticide and addiction continue to exist in our society. Reeling out statistics on the state of women, India's gender inequality index value places it at a lowly 129 rank of the total 149 countries. Child sex ratio has declined by 13 points from 927 in 2001 to 914 in 2011. It is projected that by 2020, there would be 28 million to 31 million surplus males in 35—51 age group leading to grave security implications. Most disturbingly, crime against women has actually increased by 29.6 percent between 2006 and 2010. One-third of women between 15 and 49 years had experienced physical violence while around one in 10 has been victims of sexual violence.

Women's empowerment is further complicated by intervening factors like gender discrimination, low level of education and work participation, poor nutritional status, poor health and lack of access to health care. Another major hurdle in empowering Indian women is poverty in the society. There exists a vicious circle of poverty in India that has a much greater impact on women. Moreover, the occupational distribution of women indicates the gender segregation of tasks and the underlying reality of high illiteracy among female workers, which consign them to low-paid, unskilled jobs compared to males.

Strategies:

Our full potential as a nation will only be realized when women, who constitute about half of our population, can fully realize their potential. Real empowerment of women has been a serious responsibility and commitment of government and society by creating an enabling environment where women can freely exercise their rights both within and outside their homes, as equal partners along with men. The following strategies are extremely crucial.

- ü Economic empowerment of women is possible only when, women have fully autonomy to spend their income, and also control resources.
- ü Efforts to improve the position of Indian women must focus on women as economic actors. There is a need to make them self-reliant.
- ü To adopt an integrated approach towards empower women through effective convergences of existing services resources, infrastructure and manpower in both women specific and women related sectors.
- ü Entrepreneurship development among women can be considered a possible approach to economic empowerment of women.
- ü To adopt a special strategy of women's component plan, to ensure not less than 50 percent of funds/benefits flow to women from other development sector
- ü Women must be viewed as critical agents in achieving development objectives rather than beneficiaries of programmes.
- ü The extent of women's involvement in the non-traditional and relatively more skill-intensive categories of labour force need to be examined.
- ü There is need for a holistic approach to women's development. Modalities need to be worked for growth that is sustainable.

intertwined and if efforts in any one dimension remains absent or weak, the outcome and momentum generated by the other components cannot be sustained, and that it is only when all these three factors are addressed simultaneously and made compatible with each other can women be truly empowered. Therefore, for the holistic empowerment of women, all ministries and departments would need to energize synergistic measures through more effective use of tools such as Gender Budgeting and platforms such as the National Mission for Empowerment of Women. The gender convergence mantra also holds a key to inclusive governance and our cherished dream of growth with justice and equality. Women's concerns have to be kept at the centre of public policy, developmental planning and governance, with recognition of their role as critical growth agents and as ambassadors of social change. To conclude, it has to be accepted that the increasing involvement of women's participation in any field is the need to lessen their household responsibilities. Men should be made to realize the necessity of sharing family responsibilities on an equal footing.

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