

# WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: A CHALLENGE OF 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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**Abstract:** *This paper attempts to analyze the status of Women Empowerment in India and highlights the Issues and Challenges of Women Empowerment. Today the empowerment of women has become one of the most important concerns of 21st century. But practically women empowerment is still an illusion of reality. We observe in our day to day life how women become victimized by various social evils. Women Empowerment is the vital instrument to expand women's ability to have resources and to make strategic life choices. Empowerment of women is essentially the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. It is the process of guarding them against all forms of violence. The study is based on purely from secondary sources. The study reveals that women of India are relatively disempowered and they enjoy somewhat lower status than that of men in spite of many efforts undertaken by Government. It is found that acceptance of unequal gender norms by women are still prevailing in the society. The study concludes by an observation that access to Education, Employment and Change in Social Structure are only the enabling factors to Women Empowerment.*

**Key Words:** - *Women Empowerment Historical Background, Globalization, Role of NGO's, Role of International agencies, Government Policies and Women Empowerment.*

## INTRODUCTION:-

The origins of the concept of empowerment go back to the civil rights movement in the USA in the 1960. It has since then been interpreted differently and filled with new meanings and is today used in such different sectors as business, social work, development discourse and by advocates of very different political agendas. The different definitions of empowerment range between defining it as a largely individual process of taking control of and responsibility for one's life and situation, and defining it as a political process of granting human rights and social justice to disadvantaged groups of people. At the former end of the continuum, where empowerment is defined largely as an individual process, empowerment can be used in the conservative political rhetoric of freeing the government of responsibility for injustices and for granting social security. Instead, the argument makes individuals and communities responsible for their own social security and welfare, without providing the necessary support and resources. At the Social Summit in Copenhagen in 1993 and the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo 1994 Governments committed themselves to the empowerment of women. This commitment was operationalized and formulated into a clear action plan at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995 where 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."

Women's empowerment is very essential for the development of society. Empowerment means individuals acquiring the power to think and act freely, exercises choice and fulfill their potential as full and equal members of society. As per the United National Development Fund for women (UNIFEM), the term women's empowerment means:

- ✓ Acquiring knowledge and understanding of gender relations and the ways in which these relations may be changed.
- ✓ Developing a sense of self-worth, a belief in one's ability to secure desired changes and the right to control one's life.
- ✓ Gaining the ability to generate choices exercise bargaining power.
- ✓ Developing the ability to organize and influence the direction of social change, to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally.

Thus, empowerment means a psychological sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power and legal rights. It is a multi-level construct referring to individuals, organizations and community. It is an international, ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to the control over these resources.

## 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, and Raja ram Mohan Rai, Ishwarchandra Vidya Sager, 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 an "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.

#### **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.

#### **ROLE OF NGO'S:**

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:**

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.

#### **GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: RESERVATIONS**

The Government of India has made structural provisions to uplift the socio-economic condition of the Scheduled Caste, through a policy of reservations or protective discrimination. Protective discrimination is an affirmative state action (Lal, 1986) that promotes Sanskritisation process among the Scheduled Castes. Scheduled Caste person changes his or her customs, ritual ideology and way of life in the direction of higher castes (Guru, 1986). Protective discriminations have three components: 1) political reservation (articles 330 and 332), which consists in reservation of 18% of seats for Scheduled Castes in legislative Assemblies and Panchayats; 2) Educational reservations (articles 15(4) and 29 that require state and union territories to reserve for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes 20 percent of all seats in educational and technical institutions; and 3 percent job reservations (articles 16 (4), 320 (4) and 333 requiring 15 percent and 7 percent position to be reserved for them at all levels in government and public sector undertaking (Shah, 1986). Reservations prevent total injustice promotes social mobility and leads to class-consciousness among the Scheduled Castes besides guaranteeing a minimum share (Khan, 1994). The policy of reservations has helped mostly those who are now in the higher income groups; but only less than 5 percent in rural areas got jobs through reservations (Selvanathan, 1989). Data from Tamil Nadu show that the Scheduled Castes Hindus are somewhat better represented in the higher occupational categories compared to the Scheduled Castes Christians. This might be because of the reservations policy that benefits Hindus and not Christian Scheduled Castes (Balakrishnan, 1993). Unfortunately, implementation of reservation policies has so far not been fully satisfactory (Vijayandre & Pradeep, 1982). Scheduled Castes are conscious of the ineffectiveness of the policies of protective discrimination of the government, since the advance of Scheduled Castes is often blocked by stubborn social forces. The civil rights enforcement cell that is expected to look into the non-implementation of reservations and economic deprivations of the Scheduled Castes is more a laughing stock than a helpful agency as it has no power to investigate and proceeds further (Khan, 1993).

Besides, a long tradition of oppression and servitude makes it difficult for the Scheduled Castes to developed in a short time the confidence they required for the total utilization of the benefits provide by the government (Beteill, 1969). Subharao (1982) suggests that while reservation policy is a must, it should not impair talent and excellence. One of the consequences of reservations, however, is that they will accentuate the alienation of Scheduled Castes; they will continue to be a separate category to enjoy the benefits of reservations and thus remains integrated with the mainstream of the society (Sinha, 1986).

#### **DECISION-MAKING:**

In terms of decision-making NFHS II had reported in the rural areas women take 71% decisions regarding "what items to cook" 26% decisions regarding obtaining health care for herself 10% in purchasing jewelry or other major household items. 12% decisions were taken by women with reference to staying with their parents or siblings and 37% about how to spend money, which they had earned. In the urban areas these figures were 71%, 35%, 13%, 18% and 57% respectively. Women between ages 15 to 19 nearly 24% are not involved in any kind of

decision-making only. 14% do not ask permission to go to the market. In rural sector 10% are involved with any decision-making and 74% need permission for going to the market. In urban sector however only 7% are not involved with any decision-making and 53% need permission for going to the market. Survey reports that of the 52% illiterate women 74% of urban resident and 55% of rural resident have access to money. Small studies on elected Panchayat leaders show episodic increase of their decision-making in personal, social and political spaces. Studies of the NFHS scale are necessary to retrieve such data especially in PACs programme areas. This could be done with reference to internal lending of SHG's as well as leveraging through other agencies in terms of both economic status enhancement and their decision-making. Interestingly some studies reflect that women's working outside home in paid job does not always translate into appreciably greater autonomy within the household for most women. In a sample study at Sonapat and Noida 66% need to consult somebody and take permission before changing jobs 27.6% women in Noida and 35.3% in Sonapat said they are allowed to buy nothing at all. Working outside home women do believe that they have more experience (91.6%), enlarged social networks (48.3%) and stronger personality (32.2%) and an increased self-esteem (98.3%) besides their decision-making power (62.2%). The researchers however observe that objective state of affairs do not bear this out and women's decision-making is concentrated to making small purchases. In buying and selling assets they have no say. Methodologically here there is a dilemma about privileging of perspective – that of the respondent or that of the urban middle class educated researcher. This is particularly pertinent as the sense of being empowered is also importantly about "feeling empowered".

### SELF HELP GROUPS:

PACS programme has largely utilized SHG's as an empowering instrument. More than 80% of these are exclusively for women. The fifth national synthesis report (Draft) reports that official perception has changed as SHG's are firmly raising voices and SHG's are being used to achieve RTI awareness:

- ❖ Women members are elected as PRI representatives.
- ❖ SHG/PRI's are regularly organizing Gram Sabha as a forum for public appraisal.

Anecdotal accounts suggest that women are economically empowered those suffering domestic violence are given legal reference and awareness to prevent child marriage promote girls education and prevent dowry marriage and alcoholism.

Self-help groups have emerged as an important strategy for empowering women and alleviating poverty. SHG's are based on idea of dialogic small groups, which shall function at developing collective consciousness. Linked with micro credit these groups are able to access credit and subsidy to meet crisis needs as well as developmental needs reducing their dependence on money lenders. There is fair amount of evidence to suggest that PACS SHG's have successfully ensured people's entitlements including women.

Statistically PAC's initiatives in realizing entitlements show that-In Balika Samridhi Yojana 189 females have been benefitted realizing 2572400 Rs. in Employment Guarantee Scheme 55397 women have been provided, 1271 girls enrolled and 9524 women provided Indira Awas Yojana. Kanya Vidya Dhan has been availed by 131 girls while Mahila Samridhi Yojana has benefitted 7 women. Maternity benefits have reached 2943 women and NFE educated 862 women. Old age pension went to 7774 women while no woman benefitted from the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana. Sam Vikas Yojana benefitted 975 women compared to 467 men Bridge courses benefitted 740 girls. Widow pension was ensured to 2948 women and 217 women get yellow cards.

The realization of entitlements has been primarily through RTI, NREGS and the women further train communities. In Jharkhand a large number of women were trained in social audit. In total number of beneficiaries of entitlement 13342 women in Bihar 156217 in Jharkhand 19906 women in Maharashtra 18762 in M.P. and Chhattisgarh and 55114 in U.P. were reached. Men have however benefitted more except in Bihar.

### VIOLENCE:

The questions regarding crimes against women are most entrenched, as most of them are committed within the family NCRB records that the highest percentage of crime against women is torture (37.7%) followed by Molestation (22.4%), Rape (11.8%), Kidnapping (8.8%) and immoral traffic (3.7%). 4.6 Dowry Death and 6.5% eve teasing were recorded. the further details report that in victims of rape 532 were below 10 and 1090 below 14. 3189 within ages of 30-50. No age is safe for women. In U.P. nearly 32% crimes against women were committed within the family by husbands and relatives. This figure when compounded with 12% dowry deaths makes 45% of crimes domestically located. Incidents of honor killings and battery though not large are often threats to women's functioning and their emotional development is severely blighted. In caste ridden society women's caste membership increase her vulnerability. Small efforts to train police by UN agencies and state initiatives are encouraging but very small in scale. They require follow-ups and support monitoring.

### WOMEN AND WORK:

Women's work is statistically less visible non-monetized and relegated to subsistence production and domestic side this accounts for 60% of unpaid family work and 98% of domestic work. The non-paid work includes domestic charges like cooking, cleaning, and child care and care for the elderly and the handicapped-traditionally understood as women's work. Subsistence activities like pitches gardening post-harvest processing, feeding farm hands, livestock maintenance, gathering of fuel, forest produce, unpaid family labour in family farm or enterprise are done by women who are reported to be non-working housewives Census estimates 51.93% men & 25% women workers while NSS estimates 52.7 male and 25.68 female workers. Most men are in stable employment. Micro studies report many challenges – 20 out of 104 women reported in a survey as non-working were actually winnowing, thrashing or parboiling (WB). S. Mukhopadhyaya in her study reports 4 times more work participation in her study. Female work participation rate in U.P. is reported as 11% with a Gender gap of 52% equal to West Bengal but less than Punjab. 56% women are in community service 17% in Manufacturing & 8.6 rural women in agriculture. Only 4% women as against 10% men are in the formal sector. If women's work is rendered visible specially unpaid household work there will be many dramatic results. Studies show that working women but 664 hours & others put 872 hours on child care, women's share of work in 55% women's unpaid work is 51% while men's is 33%. R. Malathy's extrapolation estimates 23,773 core as the value of women's household reserve rendered by women in the urban sector alone. From 17% women's contribution will increase to 33% of agricultural earning will include unpaid household work. Restriction on women's mobility, complete child care responsibility ideology of female seclusion, vulnerability to abuse, low access to information and mass

media, low literacy, assumption that women's supplementary and confinement to largely manual untrained tasks leads to women's poor access to income.

### WOMEN AND REFORMS:

It is often argued that economic reforms have had a differential gender impact but there are further complexities. The reforms have meant more openness in trade regime and progressive decontrol of domestic production sector. There seems a steady withdrawal of state presence from the production sector arguing that this would promote greater efficiency and accountability. There has however been much protest that this will leave labour more vulnerable as profit motive alone drives the market. Market argues that since women are crowded towards the bottom end of labour market they will be more adversely impacted. The 55th round of National Sample Survey organization (1999-2000) generally reflects that over the years especially in urban areas gender differences in the structure of industrial and occupational distributions and distribution of labour status categories seems to have lessened. There is higher demand of female labour in some sectors which can be linked to a thrust towards export orientation and deregulation in the domestic production sector.

According to Swapna Mukhopadhyaya changes in structure of job opportunities have not translated into overall reduction in the degree of market segmentation along gender lines. There is marginal decrease in employment of men and marginal increase for women in urban India. Educated women in the labour market who are unemployed are for more than their male counterparts 62.7% unemployed women in rural areas as compared to 56.9% men. It seems IT enabled sectors in recent years may have benefitted educated women. There is not enough reliable data but persistently low wages of women to the tune of 50% to 80% compare to men suggest systematic wage discrimination. Wage earnings in casual female workers in 1999-2000 were 64.70% of corresponding male earnings in rural India are even lower at 60.57% in urban India. 2005 HDR reports that women spend 457 minutes at work as compared to 391 minutes per day for men.

### CONCLUSION:

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 Govt. 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. Then only the Vedic verse (Wherever Women is respected, God resides there) would come true.

The most critical component of women's empowerment is found to be education. It leads to improved economic growth, low fertility rate, health and sanitation and an awareness of factors that disempowered women. Work participation rate and political participation also grows in women's education. The expansion of the market economy and industrialization and globalization brought increased inequalities, resulting in loss of livelihoods, erosion of natural resources and with it decreased women's access to water, fuel, fodder and traditional survival resources. It also brought new forms of exploitation-displacement, tourism, sex trade and retrenchment to mention a few. Women are being pushed into less productive sectors. Increased pressure on rural resources accelerated migration to urban areas in search of livelihood. People from backward regions, tribal communities, disadvantaged castes and the displaced communities were being pushed against the wall. Women in such countries shouldered the brunt and this phenomenon was labeled feminization of poverty.

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