



## UNDERSTANDING WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

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**Abstract** – Female economic empowerment symbolizes the process whereby women gain the ability to determine their choice to exercise their right to control and profit from the economic resources, assets, income as well as the ability to manage the risk and improve their economic status, sense of self worth, well being and are recognized for their paid – unpaid contribution in households, at work and in wider society along with influencing social change for themselves and the wider community. Economically empowered women make invaluable contribution to the improvement of health condition, educational status and productivity of whole families and community which improve the prospects for next generation. Women in India represent 29% of the labour force. Over 51% of female labour in India is unpaid; 95% is informal and unprotected. And the most startling fact – women spend 90% of their income on their families. Thus by giving women access to education, vocational skills, health services, protection by law, policies, say in leadership and taking decisions and quality formal work not only economically empowers them but also bring gender equality, and sustainable development of the country.

The story of a woman's journey is one of struggle and resilience. Men and women both work, but the kind of work women do often remain undocumented and unaccounted which adversely impacts government's policy formation, status of women and people's perspective. There are in fact seven categories of work that women do in urban and rural India as seen below in Fig. 1.

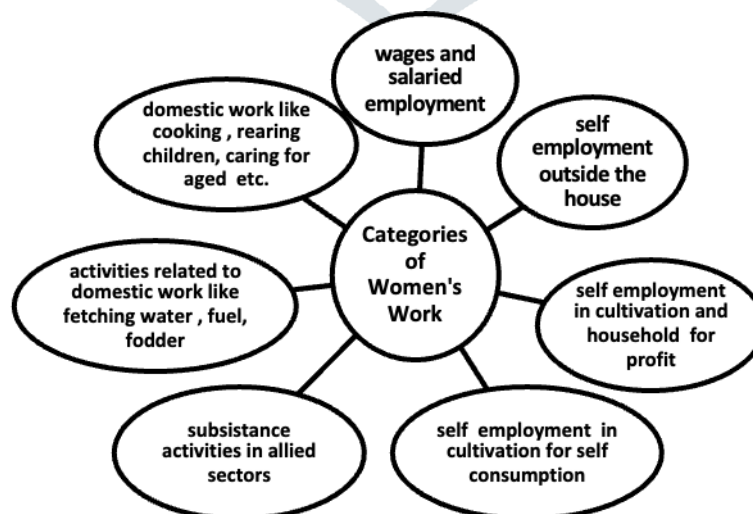


Fig.1. Categories of Women's Work

Census defines work as, ‘...participation in any economically productive activity. Such participation can be mental or physical in nature.’ Work also involves effective direction and supervision of work. It also includes unpaid work on farm or in family enterprise. By this definition, work covers only wages and salaried employment, self employment outside the household for profit, self employment in cultivation and household industry for profit, Though cultivation for crops for own consumption is included, it excludes pre and post harvest operations carried out by women within the domestic premises. (Krishnaraj: 1990)

The main reasons for the obscurity of women’s work from statistical data are – cultural framework of women’s work as well as inadequate format of questions and insensitivity of the investigators and of data collection agencies.

Some glaring facts –

- Only 20.3% of women aged 15 years or older participate in the labour force as compared to 76% of men.
- Women account for only 29% of the labour force.
- Over 51% of the work done by female sex in India is unpaid.
- 95% is informal and unprotected.
- Female farmers make up 38.87% of agricultural labour and yet own only 9% of the land.
- 47% of Indian women do not have a bank account for their own use.
- Assets of value are owned by only 60% women in their own name.
- Only 14% of businesses are run by women.
- Only 8.9% of firms have women in top management positions.
- Women account for only 13.8% of Board directors from listed companies in India.
- 12 million women, approximately 10% of women’s employment, maybe displaced due to automation by 2030.
- Women are underrepresented across infrastructure related sectors like –
  - Oil and gas 7%
  - Automotive 10%
  - Pharmaceutical and healthcare 11%
  - Information and technology 28%
- As against the International average of 37%, Indian women contribute only 17% to National GDP.
- 90% of a woman’s income is spent on their family needs.

The above data presents a bleak situation regarding women’s work. Globalization has drawn hundreds of thousands of women into paid employment across the developing economies but they are invisible, obscure and unremunerated; women are displaced by men due to the impact of technology, high incidence of physical and sexual exploitation of women.

### **Women in the Formal sector**

As the economy is developing and broadening, the share of women working in the formal sector is also increasing gradually. In the formal sector we find two sub – sectors i.e. the private sector and the public sector. Women are involved in the following type of activities in the above sectors:

- Agriculture and allied activities
- Mining and quarrying
- Manufacturing
- Electricity, gas and water
- Construction
- Wholesale, retail business, hotel and restaurants
- Transport, storage and communication
- Financial, insurance, real estate and business services

- Community and social services
- Services sector like doctors, nurses, teachers, bankers etc...

The organized or the formal sector is defined as those economic establishments or enterprises which are guided by sets of accepted guidelines and regulations. The organized sector of the Indian economy includes the following:

- All public sector enterprises i.e., all services under the Central, State and local governments and occupations in public undertakings in the fields of industry, credit financing, public utilities etc.
- All non – agriculture private sector establishments which employ 10 or more persons (CSWI 1974)

The organized sector, also acknowledged as the formal sector, plays a noteworthy role in the economy of a country not only by producing goods and services but also by providing employment to a large number of people. Organized sector employs only about 7% of the bulk of overall workers. Over the years women's employment has been significantly higher in private establishments than in public establishments in the organized sector. The highest increase women's employment has been noted in the community, personal and social services division in the public sector. In the private sector women mostly work in manufacturing and agriculture. Notably, financial, insurance, real estate and transport, storage and communication have emerged as important areas of women's employment in the public sector.

Women work at different levels and under different conditions in the organized sector. A large number of women work in agriculture, mines, factories and plantations as labourers or as assembly level workers in formal establishments. Their numbers are comparatively increasing than those of the women working at the executive level. In the private sector only a few female CEOs are found to head their establishments.

Thus as we see that only a negligible number of women are employed in the organized sector. They are protected under laws such as the Factories Act 1948, the Plantation Labour Act 1951, the Mines Act 1952, the Maternity Benefit Act 1961, the Bidi and Cigar Workers (Conditions of Employment) Act 1966, the Equal Remuneration Act 1976 etc. It's also a paradox that the same laws that protect women from injustice at work place, work against hiring of women.

The improvement in the educational status among females is reflected in the service sector where women are involved in teaching, banking, as health care workers and personal services. These jobs have better acceptance in society and families as they conform to the gender stereotyping of employment.

Though in the organized sector women are employed following prescribed rules and procedures, yet they encounter various obstacles. Some are as follows –

- Concentration in paid unskilled jobs, mostly in the industries because of low access to training and education.
- Women are victims of unequal pay for equal work and are hardly given overtime or promotions.
- Women have inadequate access to benefits and facilities like restrooms, child care facilities, maternity leave, lack of proper contracts, and health insurance etc. inspite of existence of trade union.
- Less than half the female employees, working in any institution get any form of training and even if they do, it's the bare basic variety which does not support their job prospects.
- There is also a very low level of awareness about occupational health and safety among women workers and unions.
- Another crucial issue facing women is one of Sexual Harassment at Workplace.
- Job security is another important issue for women's employment.
- The dual burden of work at home and in office also creates a major stressful situation for women in terms of role conflict, often leaving them unable to break the glass ceiling at work despite having huge potential.

Apart from the above problems, matters of the increasing cost of living, opening of new avenues of employment, career aspirations, increased educational standards, and rising awareness among women are urging women to take up jobs and climb the ladder of success and overcome obstacles. Yet we have a long way to go to obtain an equitable and secure working environment for women.

### **Women in the Informal Sector**

Unorganized or informal economy comprises an essential part of the Indian economy. More than 90% of the workforce and about 50% of the gross national income are absorbed for by the informal economy. A large percentage of socially and economically weaker population of the society is focused in the informal economic activities

Approximately 94% of total female workers are employed in informal sector, in India, wherein 20% of above work in the urban sector. Nearly 50% of these female workers are the sole bread winners of the family. In totality, 96% of women are employed in the unorganized sector in comparison to only 9% males. In urban areas, this percentage is 65% - 70%

A large number of people engaged in urban unorganized sector are mostly migrants from rural areas with poor education, poor vocational training and are working in low paying, low skilled or unskilled job. The employing enterprises also have low productivity and earnings; hence do not provide full time jobs. For the workers, the working environment is also not conducive with poor ventilation, long hours of work, low wages, poor toilet facilities, exploitation by employers, no or very few breaks, no leaves or very few paid leaves including maternity leave, no job security, no legal protection, no pension and no health insurance.

In agrarian areas, women work in the sectors of agriculture, plantation, fisheries, poultry and dairy, livestock, forestry. Agriculture continues to be a major field for women's employment with 78 % of economically active women engaged in agriculture; 50 % as labourers and 37% as cultivators. In the urban areas, females work as house helps, as piece rate workers, self employed workers, paid workers in informal enterprises, unpaid workers in family businesses, casual workers without fixed employers, sub – contract workers limited to formal enterprises, manufacturing units of garment and food processing, household related activities, street vendors, rag pickers, beauticians, sales girls, construction labourers etc.

Low income women workers especially in the informal sector make up one of the most exploitable section in the Indian economy. Some factors for their powerlessness are –

- Irregular work
- Low economic status
- Lack of access to negotiating power
- Lack of ownership towards their income
- Need to balance paid work with care for children and household work
- Little or no access to institutional credit, training or information
- Lack of assets

Land is of crucial importance in the rural areas, however, women are systematically denied right and access to land. Even if women have the land in their names yet the financial control of it stays in the hands of the male members of the family.

The process of expansion as discussed earlier has not brought about positive changes in the women's working pattern; it's generally found that the effect on women is graver. This is so because for one women are involved with the most unskilled manual labour which is usually the first to be mechanized; secondly, women are not given training in skills hence find it difficult to get reabsorbed in the workforce; and thirdly, women's employment is hardly protected by the trade unions.

Thus in the informal sector women continue to work in the most harmful conditions without access to education, training or job and income security. As a result they also face many health problems like postural difficulties, pain and stiffness in joints, eye problems, arthritis, disturbances in the menstrual cycles, and problems during pregnancy etc

Disproportionate gender relations play a very important role in defining women's insecurities. Given their pregnable status at home and powerlessness at work, mere generation of income may not improve the socio – economic status of women attached to the unrecognized sector. To improve their negotiating power both at home and at work, their economic accreditation needs to move along with their political emancipation. Thus organizing women in the informal economy could have a huge beneficial impact on their work and their life as is shown by organizations like for e.g. Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) and Women's Working Forum.

### **Women's Economic Empowerment**

Women's work is of tremendous value to the family, society and state but it has always remained invisible. Their work is taken for granted, often under the garb of a women's duty as part of their caring, nurturing and self effacing nature.

Women do unpaid work at home, family land, family business etc. apart from working outside the home, whereas men only work outside the home for which they are paid. Various literature reviews have shown that economically empowering women will have a greater impact on the advancement of the economy as they spend 90% of their income on the family.

Women's economic empowerment refers to the process whereby women gain the ability to determine their choice to exercise their right to control and profit from the economic resources, assets, income as well as the ability to manage the risk and improve their economic status, sense of self worth, well being and get acknowledged for their paid – unpaid contribution in households, at work and in wider society along with influencing social change for themselves and the community. Economically empowering women means recognizing their contributions and their knowledge; helping them fight their fears and sense of inadequacy; enhancing their self respect and dignity; controlling their own bodies; becoming economically independent and self reliant; controlling resources like land and property; reducing their burden of work; creating and strengthening sisterhood and promoting, nurturing, caring and gentleness. The core of the concept of empowerment lies in the ability of the women to control their own destiny.

Gender equitability in India, can lead to an estimated economic gain of US\$700 billion of added GDP by 2025. As per IMF estimates, Indian GDP can rise by 27%, if there is equal participation of women workers in the workforce. Globally women make or influence 80% of acquiring decisions and control US\$ 20 trillion in global spending. It has been creditably proven that empowering women in emerging markets results in huge profits as stated by 1 in 3 private sector leaders. 90% of women's income is spent on their families. Economically empowered women augment demand, have healthier and better educated children, and improve human development levels.

Despite making significant contribution to global economies through various activities, women remain the world's most economically disadvantaged groups.

India set a precedent by recognizing women's rights through universal suffrage right from independence. Since then, the Government of India has taken several steps for empowering women, many of which are reflected in the Planning Commission's Five-Year Plans (FYP).

At the same time, the government also commissioned a number of reports on the issue of women empowerment. All of these reports left a mark on the Planning Commission's FYPs that were being framed around the time and thereby, informed the policies crafted by the government.

Apart from these reports, there were a number of landmark developments such as, the setting up of the National Commission for Women, the 9th FYP (1997-2002) that witnessed the adoption of the Women's Component Plan (WCP) requiring ministries to ensure that at least 30% of funds are earmarked for women, and the adoption of Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) in 2005-06. 2007 was also a momentous year for women, since it saw the formation of the Group of Feminist Economists who reviewed the various sectoral and steering committee reports backing the 11th FYP in an effort to include both the genders. Between 2005 and 2014, many prominent schemes and initiatives which showed considerable resource allocations from a gender perspective were launched. These included the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA).

In 2017-18, the government for the very first time, declared its actual expenditure in the Gender Budget Statement for that year. Recent government actions do indicate an overall thrust at pushing policies that make women active participants in their own growth stories. For instance, in 2018, NITI Aayog set up the Women Entrepreneurship Platform (WEP). Likewise, other schemes and campaigns such as the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao Yojana, Mahila-E-Haat, and the Ujjwala scheme demonstrate the commitment to create a safe domain for women to flourish. Apart from the above plans, policies and schemes, many laws have also been formulated as for economically empowering women like Equal Remuneration Act 1976; Sexual Harassment of Women at Work Place (Prevention, Protection and) Act-2013 etc.

The women workers face the dilemma whether to work, or not to work, owing to dire the need of income. It has been noticed that women find it difficult to enter the regularized system of organized sector. It is also observed, that there are no economic reasons for paying lower wages or giving only a particular type of work to women workers.

The society has to meet this challenge. It is difficult but it has to be done for the profit of the country because the National Income consists of incomes of all the persons and if half of the work force is forced to earn as low as two third of the other half, the ultimate sufferer is the economy as a whole.

### Conclusion

It is strongly recommended that mere framing of policies and acts may not serve the purpose; efforts have to be made at the grass root level. Fig.3 below shows the driving factors for women's economic empowerment, whose addressal will go a long way towards the economic empowerment of women.

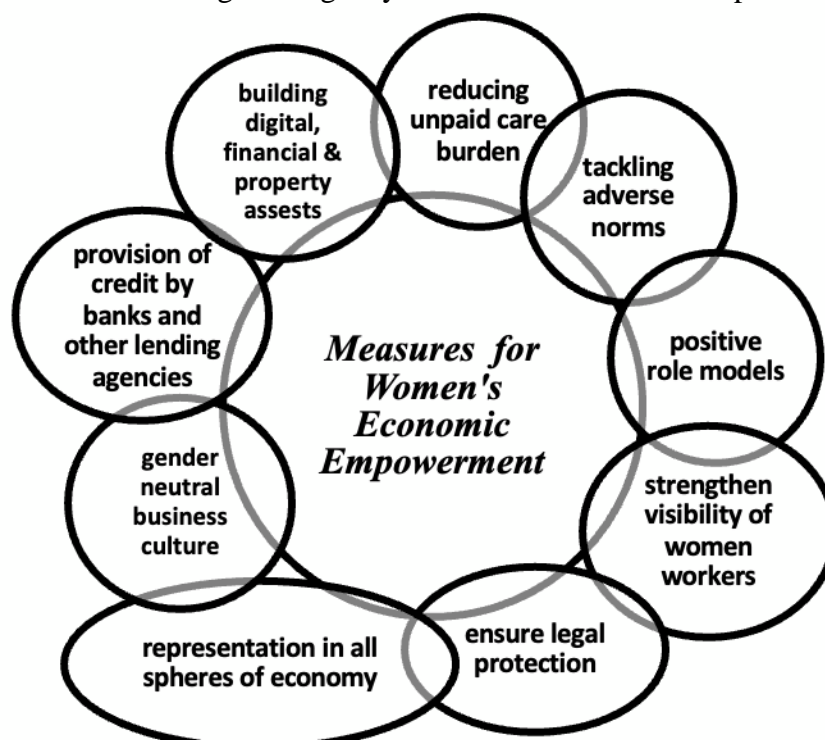


Fig. 3. Driving factors for Women's Empowerment

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru has very aptly said, “To awaken the people, it is the women who must be awakened. Once she is on the move, the family moves, the village moves, the nation moves”. If women are not empowered, they are prevented from enjoying security and protection in life. Women cannot form their identity in society unless they are socially and economically empowered. For a fair, dynamic and developing society, it is essential that women are provided equal opportunities at work.

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