

MAJOR ISSUES & CHALLENGES OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT



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Abstract:

The term “Women Empowerment” which is basically a process of creation of an environment where women can think and grow independently and make their own decisions on their personal development and contribute their best to the development of the society. In the past few decades, we have succeeded in removing the psychological barrier of mostly male dominated society and women now have been flourishing at great pace and making their presence felt in all spheres of life; social, economical, political and in the scientific advancement as well. The women CEO's of India's top most companies and presence of Indian women in Forbes Most Influential Women list indicates the ascendance of Indian women on higher ladder of achievement culminating into Empowered Women. There is no denying the fact that education has played a vital role in ameliorating the status of women. From the chair person of Indian Parliament to the distinguished judges of Supreme Court of India, remarkable changes in the positions of women could be noticeable. However, great variations in the positions of women still exist at every nook and corner of the country. The researchers underline the fact that only a marginal section of the society has been empowered while those belonging to the lower middle class and to the rural areas are deprived of their share in the development process. In this regard, this paper aims to review the major issues & challenges of women empowerment.

Keywords: Women, Empowerment, Human Rights, Violence

Women have generally been looked upon with contempt for centuries with various strictures inflicted upon them reducing their status to the mercy of men. They have been confined to hearth and home. But now the perspective of the society has changed and a general thinking to work for the emancipation and empowerment of women is being developed so that they could also contribute in the enhancement and welfare of the society.

A woman's empowerment begins with consciousness—perceptions about herself and her rights, her capabilities and her potentials, awareness of how gender and

socio-cultural and political forces affect her. Political empowerment, economic development and social upliftment of women are necessary and desirable to fight myriad forms of patriarchal domination, and discrimination at every stage. In fact, women's empowerment is central to the achievement of the triple goals of equality, development and social justice. And for that political participation is needed.

In a democratic system, women participation may be viewed at two levels:

- (i) Awareness and assertion of women political rights;



(ii) Acquisition and exercise of power.

Twentieth Century has brought a great change in the life of women all over world and 21st Century is the century of women. Woman's attitudes, values, inspirations, ways of feelings, standards of behaviour and acting for effective participation in all walks of life are becoming reality. Rays of hope are becoming brighter and radical changes in and through women's thrust in socio-economic and political process, will be instrumental to healthier, happier and progressive state in near future. As the largest vibrant democracy in the world, India has been continuously experimenting with a number of forms and modes of organizations and structures to achieve gender equality. Even then gender bias and discrimination at every stage show, what kind of society women have to live in. One can just think, the way the girls and boys grow up in their childhood.

Women Emancipation

But their emancipation is not without challenges. Breaking the age old barriers, storming into a predominantly male bastion are something they have to fight for. Even as they are becoming aware about their rights and demands, the violence and crime against women is on the increase. History is the witness that the women had enjoyed a privileged position in ancient India. It is definitely a matter of pride that there existed a culture and them a respectful Living in the social life. However, the woman lost their status with the coming up of Brahminical traditions and with the advent of Islam, they were further pushed into the background. They were left secluded, devitalized and sheltered and these practices slowly turned into customs which have now become traditions.

A new chapter was added into the history of women's empowerment with India gaining independence. The norm of their less, unimportant of secondary role to that of men was withdrawn. When the new constitution

was formed, the constitution makers took into account the Women's plight and asserted by introducing various measures in the constitution to hold their rightful place in the society. They were given freedom to participate in the social, political, economic and cultural life of the nation.

Feminism Movement

During 1960s and 1970s the movement by the women to seek equality with men gained ground all over the world. With this movement called feminism, the educated women in particular and poor rural women in general realized the need to break the old shackles to breathe in the open space. Still the experience shows that man's tyrannical hegemony is overwhelmingly strong and deep rooted to allow for any change in the short run. In India a crime is committed against a woman every seven minutes. Every 26 minutes a molestation take place and every 54 minute somewhere a woman is raped. The burning of brides for dowry continues unabated in the various parts of the country.

The condition of rural women is still more deplorable. The various women's movements are led and organised by white collared middle class women and social workers from upper and upper middle class non-working women who are unaware about the ground realities existing in the rural structure of Indian society and are not concerned to the rural women's miserable conditions. Women's organization has lobbied heavily for the introduction of Women Reservation Bill for 33 per cent reservation in Lok Sabha and in state assembly seats.

In the Panchayats and municipalities the reservation has already been provided. They have said that the reservations would give them political platform to work for the rest of women for their emancipation. The government has also taken various measures like committee on statues of women in 1974, followed by National Plan of Action for



women and the National Perspective Plan for women in 1988.

However despite of these measures, the challenges before the women for their emancipation has remained still an uphill task and their conditions still remained the same. What is required is the seriousness of the various government agencies to work for the women's empowerment by spreading awareness through various educative programmes.

An expert group meeting on Equality in Political Participation and Decision-making organized by DAW made the following recommendations to women's status in political parties: ??As an interim measure, substantial targets, such as quotas or similar forms of positive action to ensure; Women's candidacy for office and participation in political posts should be applied;

- Training programmes should be developed to increase the political and management skills of women in politics, both as candidates and as elected or appointed officials, especially making use of the experience of other women who have achieved public office.
- Women's sections of parties should be evaluated and strengthened to enable them to influence party policy and promote female candidacy.
- Information on potential women candidates should be compiled, maintained on a systematic basis and made available when candidacy or appointments are considered.
- Parties should be encouraged to examine the criteria used to select persons for political functions to ensure that the varieties of experience possessed by women are taken into account in selection.
- Training activities should be developed to sensitize party members to the needs and potentials of female members.

➤ As an interim measure where the electoral system might make it useful, parties should undertake special measures to provide funding for women candidates for office.

Other important mechanisms include networking, participation in the campaigns of other politicians, lobbying, and membership in the same clubs, professional and academic associations. The corrective mechanisms are to be viewed holistically and not as isolated piecemeal actions. Only then the women will be at par with men in all fields.

Concept of Empowerment

Empowerment refers to policies and measures designed to increase the degree of autonomy and self-determination in the lives of people and in communities in order to enable them to represent their interests in a responsible and self-determined way, acting (again) on their own authority. Empowerment refers both to the process of self-empowerment and to professional support of people, which enables them to overcome their sense of powerlessness and lack of influence, and to recognize and eventually use their resources and chances.

Empowerment is a multi-dimensional process, which should enable women or group of women to realize their full identity and power in all spheres of life. It consists of greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision making to enable them to have greater ability to plan their lives, or to have greater control over the circumstances that influence their lives and free from shocks imposed on them by custom, belief and practice. Generally development with justice is expected to generate the forces that lead to empowerment of various sections of population in a country and to raise their status especially in case of women. "Empowerment comes from Women's groups who seek to empower themselves through greater self-reliance. They have right to determine their own



choices in life. They also seek to gain control and access to resources". Empowerment is process, which helps people to gain control of their lives through raising awareness, taking action and working in order to exercise greater control.

It often involves the empowered developing confidence in their own capacities. Empowerment is probably the totality of the following or similar capabilities:

1. Having decision-making power of their own
2. Having access to information and resources for taking proper decision
3. Having a range of options from which you can make choices
4. Ability to exercise assertiveness in collective decision making
5. Having positive thinking on the ability to make change
6. Ability to learn skills for improving one's personal or group power.
7. Ability to change others' perceptions by democratic means.
8. Involving in the growth process and changes that is never ending and self-initiated
9. Increasing one's positive self-image and overcoming stigma

Issues and Problems faced by Women in India

There are various issues and problems which women generally face in the society in India. Some of the problems are mentioned and described below:

1. Selective abortion and female infanticide: It is the most common practice for years in India in which abortion of female fetus is performed in the womb of mother after the fetal sex determination and sex selective abortion by the medical professionals.

2. Sexual harassment: It is the form of sexual exploitation of a girl child at home,

streets, public places, transports, offices, etc by the family members, neighbors, friends or relatives.

3. Dowry and Bride burning: It is another problem generally faced by women of low or middle class family during or after the marriage. Parents of boys demand a lot of money from the bride's family to be rich in one time. Groom's family perform bride burning in case of lack of fulfilled dowry demand. In 2005, around 6787 dowry death cases were registered in India according to the Indian National Crime Bureau reports.

4. Disparity in education: The level of women education is less than men still in the modern age. Female illiteracy rate higher in the rural areas. Where over 63% or more women remain unlettered.

5. Domestic violence: it is like endemic and widespread disease affects almost 70% of Indian women according to the women and child development official. It is performed by the husband, relative or other family member.

6. Child Marriages: Early marriage of the girls by their parents in order to be escaped from dowry. It is highly practiced in the rural India.

7. Inadequate Nutrition: Inadequate nutrition in the childhood affects women in their later life especially women belonging to the lower middle class and poor families.

8. Low status in the family: It is the abuse or violence against women. Women are considered as inferior to men so they are not allowed to join military services.

9. Status of widows: Widows are considered as worthless in the Indian society. They are treated poorly and forced to wear white clothes.



Earlier women were facing problems like child marriage, sati pratha, pardaprattha, restriction to widow remarriage, widows' exploitation, devadasi system, etc. However, almost all the old traditional problems have been disappeared gradually from the society but given rise to other

Need for Women Empowerment

Reflecting into the "Vedas Purana" of Indian culture, women are being worshiped such as LAXMI MAA, goddess of wealth; SARSWATI MAA, for wisdom; DURGA MAA for power. The status of women in India particularly in rural areas needs to address the issue of empowering women. About 66% of the female population in rural area is unutilized. This is mainly due to existing social customs. In agriculture and Animal care the women contribute 90% of the total workforce. Women constitute almost half of the population, perform nearly 2/3 of its work hours, receive 1/10th of the world's income and own less than 1/ 100th the world property. Among the world's 900 million illiterate people, women out number men two to one. 70% of people living in poverty are women. Lower sex ratio (i.e.) 933, the existing studies show that the women are relatively less healthy than men though belong to same class. They constitute less than 1/7th of the administrators and managers in developing countries. Only 10% seats in World Parliament and 6% in National Cabinet are held by women.

Major Ways to Empower Women in Society

- Changes in women's mobility and social interaction
- Changes in women's labour patterns
- Changes in women's access to and control over resources and
- Changes in women's control over Decision making
- Providing education
- Self employment and Self help group

- Providing minimum needs like Nutrition, Health, Sanitation, Housing
- Other than this society should change the mentality towards the word women
- Encouraging women to develop in their fields they are good at and make a career

Schemes for Women Empowerment

The Government programmes for women development began as early as 1954 in India but the actual participation began only in 1974. The efforts of government and its different agencies are ably supplemented by nongovernmental organizations that are playing an equally important role in facilitating women empowerment. Despite concerted efforts of governments and NGOs there are certain gaps. At present, the Government of India has over 34 schemes for women operated by different department and ministries. Some of these are as follows;

1. Rashtra Mahila Kosh (RMK) 1992-1993
2. Mahila Samridhi Yojana (MSY) October,1993.
3. Indira Mahila Yojana (IMY) 1995.
4. Women Entrepreneur Development programme given top priority in 1997-98.
5. Mahila Samakhya being implemented in about 9000 villages.
6. Swayasjdhya.
7. Swa Shakti Group.
8. Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women(STEP).
9. Swalamban.
10. Crèches/ Day care centre for the children of working and ailing mother.
11. Hostels for working women.
12. Swadhar.
13. National Mission for Empowerment of Women.
14. Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) (1975),
15. Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescence Girls (RGSEAG) (2010).



16. The Rajiv Gandhi National Crèche Scheme for Children of Working Mothers.
17. Integrated Child Protection scheme (ICPS) (2009-2010).
18. Dhanalakshmi (2008).
19. Short Stay Homes.
20. Ujjawala (2007).
21. Scheme for Gender Budgeting (XI Plan).
22. Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP).
23. Training of Rural Youth for Self Employment (TRYSEM).
24. Prime Minister's Rojgar Yojana (PMRY).
25. Women's Development Corporation Scheme (WDCS).
26. Working Women's Forum.
27. Indira Mahila Kendra.
28. Mahila Samiti Yojana.
29. Khadi and Village Industries Commission.
30. Indira Priyadarshini Yojana.
31. SBI's Sree Shakti Scheme.
32. SIDBI's Mahila Udyam Nidhi Mahila Vikas Nidhi.
33. NGO's Credit Schemes.
34. National Banks for Agriculture and Rural Development's Schemes

Challenges of Women Empowerment

There are several constraints that check the process of women empowerment in India. Social norms and family structure in developing countries like India, manifests and perpetuate the subordinate status of women. One of the norms is the continuing preference for a son over the birth of a girl child which is present in almost all societies and communities. The society is more biased in favor of male child in respect of education, nutrition and other opportunities. The root cause of this type of attitude lies in the belief that male child inherits the clan in India with an exception of Meghalaya. Women often internalize the traditional concept of their role as natural thus inflicting an injustice upon them. Poverty is the reality of life for the vast majority women in India. It is the another factor that poses challenge in realizing women's empowerment. There are

several challenges that are plaguing the issues of women's right in India. Targeting these issues will directly benefit the empowerment of women in India

Education

While the country has grown from leaps and bounds since independence where education is concerned. the gap between women and men is severe. While 82.14% of adult men are educated, only 65.46% of adult women are known to be literate in India. The gender bias is in higher education, specialized professional trainings which hit women very hard in employment and attaining top leadership in any field.

Poverty

Poverty is considered the greatest threat to peace in the world, and eradication of poverty should be a national goal as important as the eradication of illiteracy. Due to this, women are exploited as domestic helps.

Health and Safety

The health and safety concerns of women are paramount for the wellbeing of a country and is an important factor in gauging the empowerment of women in a country. However there are alarming concerns where maternal healthcare is concerned.

Professional Inequality

This inequality is practiced in employment and promotions. Women face countless handicaps in male customized and dominated environs in Government Offices and Private enterprises.

Morality and Inequality

Due to gender bias in health and nutrition there is unusually high morality rate in



women reducing their population further especially in Asia, Africa and China.

Household Inequality

Household relations show gender bias in infinitesimally small but significant manners all across the globe, more so, in India e.g. sharing burden of housework, childcare and menial works by so called division of work.

Empowerment of Women

Active participation of any community in the development process is recognized as a tool for its empowerment. In Indian social set up, the participation of women in the development process has to be ensured through tangible measures taken at various levels for their overall development. The government has taken a conscious view to make adequate provisions in its policies and programmes, through which it is to be ensured that the women of the country are not only empowered but also become active participants in the development process in the country. Various programmes of the Ministry of Rural Development are formulated keeping in view the above perspective.

Ministry of Rural Development is implementing various poverty alleviation and rural development programmes. These programmes have special components for women. Major schemes, having women's component, implemented by the Ministry include the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), Swarnjayanti Gram Warozgar Yojana (SGSY) now restructured as National Rural Livelihood Mission, (Aajeevika) and the Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY). The implementation of these programmes is monitored specifically with reference to coverage of women. But this programme does have a significant impact on the living conditions of the rural women in terms of providing connectivity through the rural

roads, which may enhance the opportunities for the girl child to have an access to the educational facilities. Similarly, due to better rural roads women may have easier access to the health facilities and local market which may not only increase their productivity but may also increase their awareness which goes a long way in changing the traditional social structure and resulting in improvement of the status of the rural women.

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA):

The MGNREGA guarantees 100 days of employment in a financial year to any rural household whose adult members are willing to do unskilled manual work. It is provided in the Act that while providing employment, priority shall be given to women in such a way that at least one third of the beneficiaries shall be women who have registered and requested for work under the Act.

During the year 2012-13 (up to 27th Dec. 2012) total employment of 134.76 crore person days were reported to have been generated. The employment generated for women were reported as 71.88 crores person days which is 53.34% of total employment generated under this Programme. To increase participation rates of women workers in MGNREGA, the Ministry has suggested that individual bank/post office accounts must compulsorily be opened in the name of all women MGNREGA workers and their wages directly credited to their own account for the number of days worked by them.

This Ministry has also advised the States:

- To identify widowed women, deserted women and destitute women who qualify as a household under the Act, to ensure that they are provided 100 days of work.
- To ensure that pregnant women and lactating mothers (at least up to 8 months before delivery and 10



months after delivery) are given works which require less effort and are close to their houses.

- To conduct time and motion studies to formulate gender, age, level of disability, terrain and climate sensitive Schedule of Rates (SoRs) and to ensure accurate capturing of work done by women at worksites.
- To ensure that at least 50% of the worksite supervisors (mates) at all worksites are women.
- To ensure that worksite facilities such as crèches, drinking water, shade etc. are provided through convergence with Women and Child Development Schemes like ICDS.
- To encourage participation of women groups, including Self Help Groups in awareness generation, capturing demand, planning, implementation, monitoring and maintenance of works. All these suggestions are also incorporated in MGNREGA Operational Guidelines 2013.

National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM):

A Self Help Group (SHG), of 10-20 women in general (5-20 in difficult areas) is the primary building block of the NRLM institutional design. NRLM would promote SHGs with exclusive women membership. The SHGs and the federation of these SHGs at village and higher levels shall serve the purpose of providing women member's space for self-help, mutual cooperation and collective action for social and economic development. NRLM is working with groups of exclusive women membership because it recognizes that women are marginalized in the economy, in polity and in society. Thus, building and sustaining institutions of poor women at various levels would give them social, economic and political empowerment and thereby bring significant qualitative improvement in their lives. NRLM will especially focus on women headed

households, single women, women victim of trafficking, women with disability and other such vulnerable categories.

The following factors define women SHGs under the NRLM:

- They are homogeneous, affinity groups of poor women, who have come together to

Overcome poverty. Membership is voluntary and it consists of only poor women.

- The federations shall have women representatives only from member SHGs and there are clear conditions for admission to the federation and clear norms for remaining as members.
- These are institutions truly owned by poor women, and they really experience 'ownership'.
- They have long term objectives. At least 10 years of continuous and nurturing support is required for a poor woman to come out of abject poverty and stay out of poverty.
- Hence SHGs and their federations need to function for a long period of time to achieve their objectives.
- The SHGs and their federations shall play an active role in taking up social issues affecting their members - issues of domestic violence, alcoholism, girl child marriages, etc. This is one of the hallmarks of a genuine self help movement.

An important component of NRLM is the Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana (MKSP) which aims at supporting women farmers. Primarily, MKSP aims to recognize women farmers,

Unrecognized category, even though most of the farming activities are almost exclusively handled by the women. MKSP also, *inter alia*, seeks to reduce drudgery for women Farmers.



they could participate and that targeted gender equality and women's empowerment.

The Indira Awaas Yojana (IAY):

Indira Awaas Yojana is a social welfare flagship programme, created by the Indian Government, to provide housing for the rural poor in India. The differentiation is made between rural poor and urban poor for a separate set of schemes operate for the urban poor (like the Basic Services for Urban Poor). IAY aims at providing assistance for the construction of houses to the people Below the Poverty Line in rural areas. Under the Scheme, priority is extended to widows and unmarried women. It is stipulated that IAY houses are to be allotted in the name of women members of the household or, alternatively, in the joint names of husband and wife.

Conclusion

Productive employment and decent work in developing countries, including in fragile contexts, are the main routes out of poverty for both women and men. Women's participation in the labour market can be increased by addressing the constraints and barriers women face accessing work, including public employment programmes, and by providing well-focused vocational training. Women experience barriers in almost every aspect of work – including: whether they have paid work at all, the type of work they obtain or are excluded from, the availability of support services such as childcare, their pay, benefits and conditions of work, the insecurity of their jobs or enterprises, their access to vocational training.

Almost two-thirds of employed women in developing countries are in vulnerable jobs, as own-account or unpaid family workers, as casual agricultural labourers at the bottom of a global value chain, as workers in urban factories and workshops or as domestic servants. It provided on-the-job training and stipends for women with children so that

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