
WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA: A STUDY

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Abstract:

In our country Gender equality is, first and foremost, a human right. A woman is entitled to live in dignity and in freedom from want and from fear. Empowering women is also an indispensable tool for advancing development and reducing poverty. Empowered women contribute to the health and productivity of whole families and communities and to improved prospects for the next generation. The importance of gender equality is underscored by its inclusion as one of the eight Millennium Development Goals. Gender equality is acknowledged as being a key to achieving the other seven goals. Yet discrimination against women and girls - including gender-based violence, economic discrimination, reproductive health Inequities, and harmful traditional practices - remains the most pervasive and ersistent form of inequality.

There are a variety of understandings of the term empowerment due to its widespread usage. If empowerment is looked upon in terms of ability to make choices: to be disempowered therefore, implies to be denied choice. The notion of empowerment is that it is inescapably bound up with the condition of disempowerment and refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such ability. Thus, there could be statistical swells indicating improvements in indicators of gender equality, but unless the intervening process involved women as agents of that change, one cannot term it as '*empowerment*'

Gender gap exists regarding access to education and employment. Household decision making power and freedom of movement of women vary considerably with their age, education and employment status. It is found that acceptance of unequal gender norms by women are still prevailing in the society.

Rural women are more prone to domestic violence than that of urban women. A large gender gap exists in political participation too. The study concludes by an observation that access to education and employment are only the enabling factors to empowerment, achievement towards the goal, however, depends largely on the attitude of the people towards gender equality.

The objectives of this research paper is to understand the problem and perspective of Women Empowerment, and attempt to analyze the status of women empowerment in India using various indicators like women's household decision making power, legal Policies for Women Empowerment, Role of Judiciary and also Awareness

Key words: Women Empowerment, legal Policies, Legal Provisions Judiciary, ILO, NGO's, Education

INTRODUCTION

In the arena of personal development, empowerment forms an apogee of many a system of self-realisation or of identity (re-)formation. Realising the solipsistic impracticality of everyone anarchistically attempting to exercise power over everyone else, empowerment advocates have adopted the word "empowerment" to offer the attractions of such power, but they generally constrain its individual exercise to potentiality and to feel-good uses within the individual psyche. The concept of personal development is seen as important by many employers, with emphasis placed on continuous learning, increased self-awareness and emotional intelligence. Empowerment is ultimately driven by the individual's belief in their capability to influence events.

Empowerment can be attained through one or many ways. An important factor in the discovery and application of the human "self empowerment" lies within the tools used to unveil the truth. It has been suggested that Yoga is one such tool that can be used for more than the obvious physical benefits. When Yoga is practiced consistently the mind / body connection is apparent. Through this connection, the individual finds him or herself with a stronger sense of self and the ability to change areas where bad habits rule, negative emotions run rampant, even controlling addictions through understanding them for what they are. What can be more empowering than gaining control over self.

DEFINITION OF EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

The Oxford American Dictionary defines "empowerment" as "to make (someone) stronger and more confident, esp. in controlling their life and claiming their rights." It means to give women power and help them face the challenges of being a woman in society.

For centuries, women were treated as less-than-equal to men in many ways. Women were not allowed to vote, own property, or work in many jobs. Now that we are out of those dark ages, women are more EMPOWERED to do whatever they want. This means that they have the ability to choose their own destiny, job, vote, and do anything a man can do. When we talk about women's empowerment, we talk about women taking more of a leadership role. Whereas until very recently, women were subordinates

Empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social or economic strength of individuals and communities. It often involves the empowered developing confidence in their own capacities.

Empowerment is probably the totality of the following or similar capabilities:

- Having decision-making power of their own
- Having access to information and resources for taking proper decision
- Having a range of options from which you can make choices (not just yes/no, either/or.)
- Ability to exercise assertiveness in collective decision making
- Having positive thinking on the ability to make change
- Ability to learn skills for improving one's personal or group power.
- Ability to change others' perceptions by democratic means.

- Involving in the growth process and changes that is never ending and self-initiated
- Increasing one's positive self-image and overcoming stigma

MARGINALIZATION

"Marginalized" refers to the overt or covert trends within societies whereby those perceived as lacking desirable traits or deviating from the group norms tend to be excluded by wider society and ostracized as undesirables.

Empowerment of women has been the central agenda for both government and NGO driven sectoral interventions. Empowerment of women as a goal of development projects and programmes has gained wider acceptance since 1990s (Karl 1995). Empowerment is an abstract and complex concept and it is interpreted in many ways.

According to the Random House Dictionary

Empowerment comes from the term empower which means "to give power or authority" and "to enable or permit". The key elements in empowerment are "enabling" and "providing power", and they reinforce each other. In practical terms however, empowerment would mean the process of challenging existing inequality, power relations, and of gaining greater control over sources of power by the under-privileged.

According to Schuler (1986)

Empowerment refers to the capacity to mobilise resources to produce beneficial social change. She identified three critical dimensions of the empowerment process such as, individual consciousness raising, collective consciousness development, and mobilisation. The third dimension builds on the first two and it is where collective skills and resources are translated into political and legal action

Conger and Kanungo (1988)

Empowerment as a "process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organisational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and through their removal by both formal organisational practices and informal techniques of providing efficacy information". They view empowerment as a "motivational construct", i.e. enabling and not simply providing.

Peggy (1989)

Empowerment from the power angle, i.e., "personal power" (the strength within each person to act). She believes empowerment is "a spectrum of political activity ranging from acts of individual resistance to mass political mobilisations that challenge the basic power relations in our society". She distinguished "personal power" (or power for) from "role power" (or power over)

The absence of a democratic context has contributed to slow progress in empowering women, particularly in South Asia. Women's empowerment movements have not survived in authoritarian regimes based on gender subordination and ideologies of male dominance. Approaches in South Asia have necessarily focused on opportunities and services rather than on political power. Conceptualizations of gender discrimination and male domination have been oversimplified and focused on elimination of obvious oppressive practices such as wife beating or dowry demands. Empowerment of women that will have lasting impacts must involve consciousness raising before the social construction of gender, which subordinates women in the family, class, caste, religion, or society, can be changed. Three experimental approaches to empowerment in South Asia have been tried: integrated development, economic empowerment, and consciousness raising. Consciousness raising has been implemented in awareness groups and education that have led to a new consciousness, self worth, societal and gender analysis, and access to skills and information. The economic empowerment approach has relied on improving women's control over economic resources and strengthening women's economic security. Grameen Bank has provided one example of organizing women around savings and credit, income generation, and skill training activities. Integrated development approaches have encouraged women's collectives that have engaged in development and social problem resolution and formed specialized activity groups as means of mobilization of women. No one design has assured success. Identification of the poorest and most oppressed in a geopolitical area has provided an entry point for action. Women were encouraged to find a separate time and space for themselves. The three aforementioned approaches have different assumptions about the reason for women's powerlessness: greater poverty and lower access to resources, economic vulnerability, and subordination within patriarchal societies and socioeconomic inequalities.

The ability of women to control their own fertility is absolutely fundamental to women's empowerment and equality. When a woman can plan her family, she can plan the rest of her life. When she is healthy, she can be more productive. And when her reproductive rights — including the right to decide the number, timing and spacing of her children, and to make decisions regarding reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence — are promoted and protected, she has freedom to participate more fully and equally in society. Gender equality implies a society in which women and men enjoy the same opportunities, outcomes, rights and obligations in all spheres of life. Equality between men and women exists when both sexes are able to share equally in the distribution of power and influence; have equal opportunities for financial independence through work or through setting up businesses; enjoy equal access to education and the opportunity to develop personal ambitions. A critical aspect of promoting gender equality is the empowerment of women, with a focus on identifying and redressing power imbalances and giving women more autonomy to manage their own lives. Women's empowerment is vital to sustainable development and the realization of human rights for all. Where women's status is low, family size tends to be large, which makes it more difficult for families to thrive. Population and development and reproductive health programmes are more effective when they address the educational opportunities, status and empowerment of women. When women are empowered, whole families benefit, and these benefits often have ripple effects to future generations. The roles that men and women play in society are not biologically determined - they are socially determined, changing and changeable. Although they may be justified as being required by culture or religion, these roles vary widely by locality and change over time. Key issues and linkages:

1) Reproductive health:

Women, for both physiological and social reasons, are more vulnerable than men to reproductive health problems. Reproductive health problems, including maternal mortality and morbidity, represent a major - but preventable - cause of death and disability for women in developing countries. Failure to provide information, services and conditions to help women protect their reproduction health therefore constitutes gender-based discrimination and a violation of women's rights to health and life.

2) Stewardship of natural resources:

Women in developing nations are usually in charge of securing water, food and fuel and of overseeing family health and diet. Therefore, they tend to put into immediate practice whatever they learn about nutrition and preserving the environment and natural resources. Economic empowerment: More women than men live in poverty. Economic disparities persist partly because much of the unpaid work within families and communities falls on the shoulders of women and because they face discrimination in the economic sphere. Educational empowerment: About two thirds of the illiterate adults in the world are female. Higher levels of women's education are strongly associated with both lower infant mortality and lower fertility, as well as with higher levels of education and economic opportunity for their children. Political empowerment: Social and legal institutions still do not guarantee women equality in basic legal and human rights, in access to or control of land or other resources, in employment and earning, and social and political participation. Laws against domestic violence are often not enforced on behalf of women. Experience has shown that addressing gender equality and women's empowerment requires strategic interventions at all levels of programming and policy-making. Women's Work and Economic Empowerment: In nearly every country, women work longer hours than men, but are usually paid less and are more likely to live in poverty. In subsistence economies, women spend much of the day performing tasks to maintain the household, such as carrying water and collecting fuel wood. In many countries women are also responsible for agricultural production and selling. Often they take on paid work or entrepreneurial enterprises as well. Unpaid domestic work – from food preparation to care giving – directly affects the health and overall well being and quality of life of children and other household members. The need for women's unpaid labour often increases with economic shocks, such as those associated with the AIDS pandemic or economic restructuring. Yet women's voices and lived experiences – whether as workers (paid and unpaid), citizens, or consumers – are still largely missing from debates on finance and development. Poor women do more unpaid work, work longer hours and may accept degrading working conditions during times of crisis, just to ensure that their families survive. Intergenerational gender gaps: The differences in the work patterns of men and women, and the 'invisibility' of work that is not included in national accounts, lead to lower entitlements to women than to men. Women's lower access to resources and the lack of attention to gender in macroeconomic policy adds to the inequity, which, in turn, perpetuates gender gaps. For example, when girls reach adolescence they are typically expected to spend more time in household activities, while boys spend more time on farming or wage work. By the time girls and boys become adults; females generally work longer hours than males, have less experience in the labour force, earn less income and have less leisure, recreation or rest time. This has implications for investments in the next generation.

“There is no chance of the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on one wing.”-Swami Vivekananda

The most significant and longest social movement continuing is movement for emancipation of women. Though the primary goal for women empowerment is to improve the quality of life of women but it has also deep ramifications in social, economic and political scenario of body polity. The media through its reach to people at large has been instrument although not to the extent desire in supporting the movement for women emancipation by focusing neglect and marginalization of the position of the women in society.

It sounds intriguing how from a highly dignified position in India's mythic history, the woman in India has been relegated to a secondary position. The vested interests of the ruling elite and the male lobby influenced by alien cultures legitimised woman as an individual of little consequence. It would be a sad commentary on the subordinate role of women in India when woman is ideally viewed as Shakti (Power), the origin of power itself but in reality found as helpless, hapless woman without any identity except that of a wife, or the mother who has very little voice in decision making and has very little by way of her own basic choice. Although discrimination against and exploitation of women are global phenomena, their consequences are more tragic in the some parts of the globe particularly in under developed countries where ignorance, deprivation of the basic necessities of life, and the ever-growing pressure of transition from tradition to modernity-all combine to aggravate the inequalities that women suffer to a point at which their existence is reduced to a continuous battle for survival. Improving the status of women is regarded as the key to narrowing the gender gap and achieving a better quality of life. Women are under great social control and scrutiny which has restricted what they can say and where and to whom. Cultural moves in almost every social set-up determine women's socialization in no uncertain terms. This has an important bearing on their ability to communicate and express their thoughts.

Women Empowerment

Gender equality is, first and foremost, a human right. A woman is entitled to live in dignity and in freedom from want and from fear. Empowering women is also an indispensable tool for advancing development and reducing poverty.

Empowered women contribute to the health and productivity of whole families and communities and to improved prospects for the next generation. The importance of gender equality is underscored by its inclusion as one of the eight Millennium Development Goals. Gender equality is acknowledged as being a key to achieving the other seven goals.

Yet discrimination against women and girls - including gender-based violence, economic discrimination, reproductive health inequities, and harmful traditional practices - remains the most pervasive and persistent form of inequality. Women and girls bear enormous hardship during and after humanitarian emergencies, especially armed conflicts. There have been several organisations and institutions advocating for women, promoting legal and policy reforms and gender-sensitive data collection, and supporting projects that improve women's health and expand their choices in life.

Despite many international agreements affirming their human rights, women are still much more likely than men to be poor and illiterate. They usually have less access than men to medical care, property ownership, credit, training and employment. They are far less likely than men to be politically active and far more likely to be victims of domestic violence.

The ability of women to control their own fertility is absolutely fundamental to women's empowerment and equality. When a woman can plan her family, she can plan the rest of her life. When she is healthy, she can be more productive. And when her reproductive rights—including the right to decide the number, timing and spacing of her children, and to make decisions regarding reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence—are promoted and protected, she has freedom to participate more fully and equally in society.

Understanding gender equality and women's empowerment

Gender equality implies a society in which women and men enjoy the same opportunities, outcomes, rights and obligations in all spheres of life. Equality between men and women exists when both sexes are able to share equally in the distribution of power and influence; have equal opportunities for financial independence through work or through setting up businesses; enjoy equal access to education and the opportunity to develop personal ambitions.

A critical aspect of promoting gender equality is the empowerment of women, with a focus on identifying and redressing power imbalances and giving women more autonomy to manage their own lives.

Women's empowerment is vital to sustainable development and the realization of human rights for all. Where women's status is low, family size tends to be large, which makes it more difficult for families to thrive. Population and development and reproductive health programmes are more effective when they address the educational opportunities, status and empowerment of women. When women are empowered, whole families benefit, and these benefits often have ripple effects to future generations.

The roles that men and women play in society are not biologically determined -- they are socially determined, changing and changeable. Although they may be justified as being required by culture or religion, these roles vary widely by locality and change over time.

Key issues and linkages

Reproductive health: Women, for both physiological and social reasons, are more vulnerable than men to reproductive health problems. Reproductive health problems, including maternal mortality and morbidity, represent a major – but preventable -- cause of death and disability for women in developing countries. Failure to provide information, services and conditions to help women protect their reproduction health therefore constitutes gender-based discrimination and a violation of women's rights to health and life.

Stewardship of natural resources: Women in developing nations are usually in charge of securing water, food and fuel and of overseeing family health and diet. Therefore, they tend to put into immediate practice whatever they learn about nutrition and preserving the environment and natural resources.

Economic empowerment: More women than men live in poverty. Economic disparities persist partly because much of the unpaid work within families and communities falls on the shoulders of women and because they face discrimination in the economic sphere.

Educational empowerment: About two thirds of the illiterate adults in the world are female. Higher levels of women's education are strongly associated with both lower infant mortality and lower fertility, as well as with higher levels of education and economic opportunity for their children.

Political empowerment: Social and legal institutions still do not guarantee women equality in basic legal and human rights, in access to or control of land or other resources, in employment and earning, and social and political participation. Laws against domestic violence are often not enforced on behalf of women.

Experience has shown that addressing gender equality and women's empowerment requires strategic interventions at all levels of programming and policy-making.

Women's Work and Economic Empowerment

In nearly every country, women work longer hours than men, but are usually paid less and are more likely to live in poverty. In subsistence economies, women spend much of the day performing tasks to maintain the household, such as carrying water and collecting fuel wood. In many countries women are also responsible for agricultural production and selling. Often they take on paid work or entrepreneurial enterprises as well.

Unpaid domestic work – from food preparation to care giving – directly affects the health and overall well being and quality of life of children and other household members. The need for women's unpaid labour often increases with economic shocks, such as those associated with the AIDS pandemic or economic restructuring. Yet women's voices and lived experiences – whether as workers (paid and unpaid), citizens, or consumers – are still largely missing from debates on finance and development. Poor women do more unpaid work, work longer hours and may accept degrading working conditions during times of crisis, just to ensure that their families survive.

Intergenerational gender gaps

The differences in the work patterns of men and women, and the 'invisibility' of work that is not included in national accounts, lead to lower entitlements to women than to men. Women's lower access to resources and the lack of attention to gender in macroeconomic policy adds to the inequity, which, in turn, perpetuates gender gaps. For example, when girls reach adolescence they are typically expected to spend more time in household activities, while boys spend more time on farming or wage work. By the time girls and boys become adults; females generally work longer hours than males, have less experience in the labour force, earn less income and have less leisure, recreation or rest time.

This has implications for investments in the next generation. If parents view daughters as less likely to take paid work or earn market wages, they may be less inclined to invest in their education, women's fastest route out of poverty.

Empowering Women through Education

"Education is one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process."
—ICPD Programme of Action, paragraph 4.2

Education is important for everyone, but it is especially significant for girls and women. This is true not only because education is an entry point to other opportunities, but also because the educational achievements of women can have ripple effects within the family and across

generations. Investing in girls' education is one of the most effective ways to reduce poverty. Investments in secondary school education for girls yield especially high dividends.

Girls who have been educated are likely to marry later and to have smaller and healthier families. Educated women can recognize the importance of health care and know how to seek it for themselves and their children. Education helps girls and women to know their rights and to gain confidence to claim them. However, women's literacy rates are significantly lower than men's in most developing countries.

Education has far-reaching effects

The education of parents is linked to their children's educational attainment, and the mother's education is usually more influential than the father's. An educated mother's greater influence in household negotiations may allow her to secure more resources for her children. Educated mothers are more likely to be in the labour force, allowing them to pay some of the costs of schooling, and may be more aware of returns to schooling. And educated mothers, averaging fewer children, can concentrate more attention on each child.

Besides having fewer children, mothers with schooling are less likely to have mistimed or unintended births. This has implications for schooling, because poor parents often must choose which of their children to educate.

Closing the gender gap in education is a development priority. The 1994 Cairo Consensus recognized education, especially for women, as a force for social and economic development. Universal completion of primary education was set as a 20-year goal, as was wider access to secondary and higher education among girls and women. Closing the gender gap in education by 2015 is also one of the benchmarks for the Millennium Development Goals.

Political Empowerment

Throughout much of the world, women's equality is undermined by historical imbalances in decision-making power and access to resources, rights, and entitlements for women. Either by law or by custom, women in many countries still lack rights to: Own land and to inherit property, obtain access to credit, attend and stay in school. Earn income and move up in their work, free from job discrimination. Moreover, women are still widely under-represented in decision-making at all levels, in the household and in the public sphere.

Addressing these inequities through laws and public policy is a way of formalizing the goal of gender equality. Legal changes, which most countries have now implemented, are often a necessary step to institute gender equality, but not necessarily sufficient to create lasting changes. Addressing the gaps between what the law proscribes and what actually occurs often requires broad, integrated campaigns.

Social Empowerment of Women

Under the social empowerment of women steps needs to be taken to improve the health status of women, reduce maternal mortality especially in the areas which do not have good medical facilities. A programme for checking the spread of sexually transmitted diseases like HIV / AIDS and infections / communicable diseases like T.B. need to be launched.

Women face high risk of malnutrition hence focused attention would have to be given to meet the nutritional needs of women at all stages of their life cycle.

The problem in the country is serious about the women belonging to disadvantaged groups. They are the most exploited lot. The Social activist should keep a vigil on the atrocities committed on women belonging to weaker sections and help them to fight the legal battle for obtaining justice. Schemes need to be introduced for helping women who are victims of marital violence, who are deserted and those engaged in sex professions.

Awareness programmes need to be organised for creating awareness among women especially belonging to weaker sections about their rights. Government has to be vigilant for ensuring that there is no discrimination against the girl child and her rights are protected. The social stigma like child marriage. Female foeticide, child abuse and child prostitution must be eradicated immediately.

Education and Women Empowerment

Education is a powerful tool of social transformation. Hence, education for Women has to be paid special attention. Greater access for women to education must be ensured in the educational system. Gender sensitivity must be developed. A watch has to be kept on drop out rate of girls and corrective measures should be taken to check the drop out rates

Role of NGO's in Women Empowerment

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 ensures 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

Women empowerment: Challenges and prospects

India, the sub-continent, is indubitably a great country of miscellaneous cultures, traditions, religions, castes and geographical characteristics. However, India is even known for its sobriquet 'male-chauvinistic nation'. It's 'Bharath Maatha' who is in turn a woman that serves as the mother of every Indian. While such a woman looks after every Indian child, women in general are simply being disregarded at the dominant men's best. Men ought not to forget the fact that 'men' are in 'Women'. Women are no less than men in India in any sector. Women are not what they really were. Some decades ago, women were limited to the kitchen. Today, Indian women have made their presence felt virtually in every field. Women have ultimately come out of their 'saree' image and entrap the nation by dint of their hard work and power. Women

Empowerment is in fact the ability of women to exercise full control over one's actions. Empowerment of women in India is conspicuous by many live examples. But, is that all? Are only those women empowered? If not, how about rest of the Indian-women world? Are the common women vested with powers to drive the nation? These above questions, if posed to our so called leaders, would simply be parried. Women have become marionettes in the hands of them.

Delegating power or an authority to a woman seemed astonishing to our governing bodies. Ironically, our country, our leaders and governing bodies in particular, are being ruled by Smt. Sonia Gandhi who is a woman. It is that woman who had been ranked 13th among world's most powerful women by Forbes magazine. It's a woman who is leading Indian National Congress as its president. Sonia Gandhi would be an epitome of women's leadership qualities. She did umpteen things what a male leader couldn't do. Smt. Mamta Banerjee is the next big name; she has managed to break the jinx of Communist Party in Bengal who has ruled there for more than half the century. She is the Railway minister of India and is working hard to improve the image of Indian railway. Smt. Mayawati who is the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh and president of the Bahujan Samaj Party is the most influential name in the Indian Politics. Smt. Pratibha Devisingh Patil is the first women President of India and is actively working for the upliftment of Indian women. The year 2009 witnessed the History written moments when Smt. Meira Kumar became the first Indian women to hold the office of the Lok Sabha Speaker. She is an ex-IFS officer and hails from the Bhojpuri land clearly indicating the women power in politics. Women could really do more than what they actually think they can. The real power within a woman is exuded by the first woman IPS Officer Kiran Bedi. The ability of a woman to break the barriers and tread on a new path was proved by her. People usually get carried by the myth that men can do far better than women. Indian women dispelled the myth by making their footprints in almost every field of work.

Women are not only law-makers and law-controllers, but also Business magnates. Chanda Kochhar is the current CEO and MD of ICICI Bank. She was born in 1961 and now heads ICICI Bank. The CEO and Chairperson of PepsiCo, Indra Nooyi, born in 1955, sets the perfect model of a Business magnate. She carved out a niche for herself in Business. Nafisa Ali who was actress, model and politician is now an eminent social worker, with her crusade on HIV/AIDS being world recognized. She has been appointed as the Chairman of the Environment Committee of Commonwealth Games Delhi 2010. She is industrious in the area of health, women and child rights poverty and social development. She reached out to the masses and made a significant difference in lives of the people. Tennis star Sania Mirza and Badminton player Saina Nehwal made their mark representing India. Women have the inherent potential to overlook any impediments, to commit themselves to their ambitions and eventually drive the nation by fulfilling them. The real empowerment is attained only when they are wise-enough and highly-powered to make decisions and women, when authoritative, would turn into economic carriers of India.

Gender equality plays a crucial role in uplifting women. Rather, gender inequality certainly needs to be abolished. Gender-based discrimination and disparity are evident from various dowry cases and sexual harassment incidents. The idea of equal employment opportunities is still lingering unimplemented in several remote areas. Women in some inaccessible areas are yet confined to their household routines while their spouses go for work. India has the lowest percentage of women employees (23%), followed by Japan (24%), Turkey (26%) and Austria (29%), according to the Corporate Gender Gap report brought out by the

World Economic Forum. Women must be given freedom to choose their interest of work and discharge their duties unbiased. Government should open its doors for women to be given opportunities to prove themselves on a par with the men. Survey confirms various percentages of employed women in distinct sectors - the financial services and insurance (60%), professional services (56%) and media and entertainment (42%). The sectors that flaunt the lowest percentage of women in the 20 economies are automotive (18%), mining (18%) and agriculture (21%). Besides employment, gender inequality is clearly observed at temples wherein only entry of male devotees is sternly followed. One of such temples is Sabarimala temple where women are not at all allowed in which creates imbalance between men and women.

"When women are the advisor, the Lords of creation don't take the advice till they have persuaded themselves that it is just what they intended to do; then they act upon it and if it succeeds, they give the weaker vessel half the credit of it; if fails, they generously give herself the whole".

The Government of India declared 2001 as the Year of Women's Empowerment. The National Policy For The Empowerment Of Women came was passed in 2001 the goal of which is to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women. The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. It underscores girl rights, health, women education, gender equality, decision making, poverty eradication and violence against women.

Women's Reservation Bill, which promises 33% of Lok Sabha seats reserved for women, is put on hold. Although it was passed by Rajya Sabha, Lok Sabha is yet to table it. The bill, if passed, makes history in Indian politics and constitution. This bill certainly adds to empowering of women. The key benefits that can be reaped out of the bill are - women's resistance to corruption, gender equality, equal employment opportunities for men and women, sensible and legal politics, sincerity and eventually transparency in implementing the policies. A berth in Lok Sabha is an impetus for women to voice their views and take up the gauntlet to bring a revolution in the country.

Women empowerment can be achieved chiefly through Health and Education. "Health is Wealth". Basic sanitation facilities, adequate medical camps, government health schemes would be conducive to bring about a major change. According to National Literacy Mission, referring to the last census held in 2001, the percentage of female literacy in the country is 54.16%. The female literacy rate has also increased from 8.86% in 1951 to 54.16%. It is noticed that the female literacy rate during the period 1991-2001 increased by 14.87% whereas male literacy rate rose by 11.72%. Enrolment of girls in schools makes a huge difference in transforming the nation.

Women are no less than outstanding, be it in business, politics, entertainment, sports or whatever. They must be provided with ardent invigoration and their spirits must be kept high to delete the term 'impossible' from the dictionary. Like sarojini naidu, Jhansi lakshmi bhai and Indira Gandhi who exemplified women empowerment with their deeds, let us expect many more epitomes of such personality traits.

Legal Provisions and National Policy for the Empowerment of Women

According to McLeod, the concept 'Empowerment' derives from Latin word '*potere*' which means "to be able". From the view of sociological aspect, empowerment is a multi-dimensional, multi-tiered and multifaceted concept. The term empowerment has different

meanings in different socio-cultural and political contexts. World Bank Report 2000/2001 describes empowerment as a process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. According to country report of Government of India, "Empowerment means moving from a position of enforced powerlessness to one of power"

India, which is a conglomerate of diverse ethnic, linguistic and geographical features, today is at the cusp of a paradigm change in its growth and its position in the world. However, India is even known for its sobriquet 'male-chauvinistic nation'. Indian myths describe our country as 'Mother India' who is a woman that serves as the mother of every Indian. While such a woman looks after every Indian child, women in general are simply being disregarded at the dominant men's best.

But we should not forget that history is a witness to the women who have in the past demonstrated unique leadership capabilities. Razia Sultana, Rani of Jhansi Laxmibai, Sarojini Naidu and Indira Gandhi are the examples of women empowerment. Earlier, most women were able to demonstrate the leadership qualities only on their home fronts, as in Indian society man has always acted as the master of the scene and the decision regarding the issue of empowering women has always been taken by him. God has gifted women with compassion, tender-heartedness, caring nature, concern for others. These are very positive signs which imply that women can be leaders. Though some women have shown their mettle yet a large number of them have to sharpen their leadership qualities in various ways. In order to help women to be in limelight, they need to be empowered. Therefore, empowerment of women is the prerequisite to transform a developing country into a developed country.

Empowerment of women had come out of the consensus arrived at the 40th Session of the UN commission on status of women in New York on March 11, 1996. In this session 'Empowerment of Women' has been depicted as conferment of power by means of law in all matters affecting gender interests, related to family well-being and socioeconomic national affairs, providing for participation in decision making in all such matters.

Famous American novelist of 19th century, Louisa May Alcott correctly opines- "***When women are the advisor, the Lords of creation don't take the advice till they have persuaded themselves that it is just what they intended to do; then they act upon it and if it succeeds, they give the weaker vessel half the credit of it; if fails, they generously give herself the whole***".

The need for Women Empowerment was felt in India long back. Raja Rammohan Roy, the religious, social, and educational reformer and 'the maker of Modern India', demanded inheritance property rights for Women, gave tremendous effort to abolish the defunct custom 'Sati', the Hindu funeral practice. Key figure of Bengali Renaissance, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar , championed the uplift of the status of women in India. Jyotirao Phule, Pearicharan Sarkar etc also fought for uplift of women. Later, 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 and the teeming millions of India would be ensures dignity and justice-social, economic and political.

Empowerment of women needs to begin with her participation in different spheres of life. Education is a great determinant in this regard. To achieve empowerment, women have to be educated and aware of their rights and privileges in a modern society. It is education which can bring about awareness in them related to their social status, injustice and differentiation meted

out to them. Besides, economic independence is a major factor which can contribute in empowering women. India in the very beginning realised this need.

The architect of Indian Constitution was of the opinion that unless and until women are empowered, nothing was going to bring about any change in their destiny. The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. Within the framework of a democratic polity, our laws, development policies, Plans and programmes have aimed at women's advancement in different spheres. India has also ratified various international conventions and human rights instruments committing to secure equal rights of women. Key among them is the ratification of the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1993. According to the 2001 Census, the percentage of female literacy in the country is 54% up from 9% 1951 by implementation of several constitutional privileges, legislative support for women, and some yojana and mission.

Constitutional Privileges for Women includes Equality before law for women (Article 14), The State not to discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them (Article 15 (i)), The State to make any special provision in favour of women and children (Article 15 (3)), The State to direct its policy towards securing for men and women equally the right to an adequate means of livelihood (Article 39(a)) equal pay for equal work for both men and women (Article 39(d)), The State to make provision for securing just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief (Article 42), Not less than one-third (including the number of seats reserved for women belonging to the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes) of the total number of seats to be filled by direct election in every Panchayat to be reserved for women and such seats to be allotted by rotation to different constituencies in a Panchayat (Article 243 D(3)).

To uphold the Constitutional mandate, India has enacted various legislative measures intended to ensure equal rights, to counter social discrimination and various forms of violence and atrocities and to provide support services especially to working women. The Government has given greater focus to issues relating to women through creation of an independent Ministry of Women and Child Development, initiation of legislation that has taken the country closer to complete legal equality for women, gender budgeting and initiation of programs for greater inclusion of women.

Although all laws are not gender specific, the provisions of law affecting women significantly have been reviewed periodically and amendments carried out to keep pace with the emerging requirements. Some acts which have special provisions to safeguard women and their interests are The Hindu Succession Act, 1956 with amendment in 2005, Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956, The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 (Amended in 1995), Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, 1971, The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976, The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986, Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987 and The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005.

Apart from these, In January 1992, the Government set-up a statutory body named 'National Commission for Women' with a specific mandate to study and monitor all matters relating to the constitutional and legal safeguards provided for women, review the existing legislation to suggest amendments wherever necessary, etc. The Department of Women & Child Development in the Ministry of Human Resource Development has prepared a "National Policy

for the Empowerment of Women” in the year 2001. The goal of this policy is to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women. On 8th March, 1996, on the occasion of International Women’s Day, the parliament passed resolution to set up a Standing Committee for the ‘improvement of the status of women’ in India and the committee on Empowerment of women was constituted in April, 1997. Empowerment is now increasingly seen as a process by which the one’s without power gain greater control over their lives. The Cairo conference in 1994 organized by UN on Population and Development called attention to women’s empowerment as a central focus and UNDP developed the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) which focuses on the three variables that reflect women’s participation in society in every aspects. 1995 UNDP report was devoted to women’s empowerment.

The intervention strategy for empowering women to have informed and effective choices on their health and nutrition and for the development of children and adolescents has to be multi-pronged. Such as, Antyodaya Anna Yojana(2000),National Rural Health Mission, 2005, Janani Suraksha Yojana,2005, Indira Sahara,2000, Mukhya Mantri Antodaya Pusthaar Yojana,2009, Hindu Succession Act,1995, Rashtriya Mahila Kosh,1993, Apna Beti Apna Dhan Yojana, Haryana(1994), Kamdhenu Yojana, Maharashtra, Girls Child Protection Scheme, Andhra Pradesh etc.

There are two main programmes in the Department of Women and Child Development, which aim at convergence of services delivery at the grass root level. Those are Integrated Child Develoment Scheme (ICDS),which reaches 85 percent of the villages in the country and Integrated Women’s Empowerment Programme(IWEP), formerly Indira Mahila Yojana, which extends to 650 blocks operate trough the self help groups of women. In the field of education, 2180 residential Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya schools have been sanctioned and are providing elementary education to 1,82,000 out of school girls. Gaun ki Beti, Kisori Balika Divas Yojana, Ladli Laksmi Yojana, Cycle Praday Yojana etc schemes were launched by the Government for empowering the girls in India.

In spite of several acts, laws, schemes, women and girls face violence in various forms in their daily life. This takes the form of female foeticide and infanticide, rape dowry death and more indirect forms such as abandonment of older women. Sexual harassment is one of the horrendous factors that suppress women. Molestation of a teenage girl by a group of nearly twenty men in a public place in Guwahati is a shame on Indian humanity.

Therefore, our efforts should be directed towards the all around development of each and every section of Indian women, not confining the benefit to a particular section of women in society, by giving them their due share. It is a must to protect their chastity, modesty and dignity and ensure their dignified position in society. Without removing social stigma, enduring progress and development could not be achieved. For this, the governmental and non-governmental organisations including media should come forward and play an active role in creating awareness in society. We need to focus particularly on women, because in every society they struggle against gender norms that limit their resources and opportunities for improvement and because we know that women empowerment is a tremendous resource for social change and a broader fight against global poverty. The task is not too difficult to achieve. The honesty and sincerity on the part of those involved is a must. If the lots of women change, definitely it will have a positive impact on society. Hence, the women’s empowerment is the need of the hour. It would be worthy to conclude with the famous speech of Swami Vivekananda“There is no chance of the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on one wing.”

DISCUSSION

“To call woman the weaker sex is a libel; it is man’s injustice to woman. If by strength is meant brute strength, then, indeed, woman is less brute than man. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man’s superior: Has she not greater intuition, is she not more self-sacrificing, has she not greater powers of endurance, has she not greater courage? Without her man could not be. If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with woman. Who can make a more effective appeal to the heart than woman?” - Mahatma Gandhi

The status and role of women and related issues, have attracted the attention of the academicians, political thinkers and social scientists both in developing as well as developed countries, partially due to the observance of the International Decade of Women (1975-85) and partially because of the widely accepted truth that a society built on the inequality of men and women involves wastage of human resources which no country can afford.

With swelling literatures on empowerment of women and with voluminous amount of public expenditure on women empowerment schemes, it becomes imperative to understand the concept of empowerment of women so as to have a better understanding of its policy implications

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

Wherever Women is respected, God resides there Authentic empowerment is the knowing that you are on purpose, doing God's work, peacefully and harmoniously.”- Wayne Dyer, American motivational speaker.

SUGGESTION AND CONCLUSION:

Inspite of the various measures taken up by the government after Independence and even during British rule the Women haven’t been fully empowered. We may be proud of women in India occupying highest offices of President, Prime Minister, Lok Sabha Speaker, Leader of the Opposition or women like Ms. Chandra Kochar occupying highest positions in the Corporate Sector but the fact remains that we still witness dowry deaths, domestic violence and exploitation of women. The female foeticide is not an uncommon phenomenon. The male female ratio though improved over last few years is still far from satisfactory. It is 940 women per 1000 men for

India in some states it is as much lower as 877. These are the states where female foeticide is maximum. The female literacy rate is also lower than the male literacy rate.

The ground reality is deprivation, degradation and exploitation of women specially women from rural areas and those belonging to deprived sectors of the society. The Urban elite class women have no doubt been benefitted by the efforts of women empowerment. A challenge of 21st century” writes “Women are being brutalized, Commodified, materialized and subjected to inhuman exploitation and discrimination” In spite of reservation being granted to women in Panchayat elections after 73rd and 74th Constitution amendment, in many Panchayats the male Chauvinism does not allow them to function independently

The Empowerment of women has become one of the most important Concerns of 21st 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

Gender equality and women's empowerment are human rights that lie at the heart of development and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Despite the progress that has been made, six out of ten of world's poorest people are still women and girls, less than 16 percent of the world's parliamentarians are women, two thirds of all children shut outside the school gates are girls and, both in times of armed conflict and behind closed doors at home, women are still systematically subjected to violence. Women empowerment connotes “Economic Empowerment” which implies a better quality of material life through sustainable livelihoods owned and managed by women, "social empowerment" which means a more equitable social status for women in society, "Legal Empowerment" that suggests the provision of an effective legal structure which is supportive of women's empowerment and "Political Empowerment" means a political system favouring the participation in, and control by women of the political decision making process and in governance

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