

## Women empowerment-issues and challenges

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### Abstract

Women's Empowerment has been an issue of immense discussions and contemplation over the last few decades world-wide. This as an agenda has been on top of the lists of most government plans & programs as well. Efforts have been made on a regular basis across nations to address this issue and enhance the socio-economic status of women. However, it has been observed that most of the policies and programs view empowerment in the economic sense only working in the belief that economic self-reliance empowers women ignoring other variables like health, education, literacy etc. This working research paper attempts to understand the concept of women empowerment on a holistic basis and critically examine the efforts initiated towards empowering women with special emphasis upon the Self Help Groups (SHGs) based upon empirical work undertaken in the Ranchi district of Jharkhand state in India. It further aims towards understanding the linkages between SHGs & women empowerment and proposing suggestions to accelerate the empowerment drive paying due attention to the local level area specific factors for a developing country like India which have a crucial impact upon region specific women empowerment process and thereby point the way for further research in the area.

**Keywords:** Women Empowerment; SHGs; Socio-economic status; income generation; economic self-reliance; India

### 1. Introduction

Women empowerment means their capacity to participate as equal partners in cultural, social, economic and political systems of a society. Empowerment is a multi-dimensional process which should enable individuals or a group of individuals to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life. It is a process that gives a person freedom in decision making. According to Webster's dictionary the word empowerment indicates the situation of authority or to be authorized or to be powerful. In other words empowers means to authorize. So empowerment is a process which gives women power or authority to challenge some situation. Empowerment is an active multi-dimensional process which enable a women to realize their identity, position and power in all spheres of life. Empowerment demands a drastic and basic changes in the system or marriage and family, husband and wife relationship and attitude towards the socialization a remarriage. Definition of empowerment keller and mbewe "empowerment is a process whereby women become able to organize themselves to increase their own, self-reliance to assert their independent right to make choices and to control resources which will assists in challenges and eliminating their own subordination. Women Empowerment refers to increasing and improving the social, economic, political and legal strength of the women, to ensure equal-right to women, and to make them confident enough to claim their rights Women empowerment means emancipation of women from the vicious grips of social, economic, political, caste and gender-based discrimination. It means granting women the freedom to make life choices. Women empowerment is not a new concept it is quite a well-known concept round the globe. Women all over the world have been challenging and changing gender inequalities since the beginning of history. These struggles have also been supported by many men who have been outraged at injustice against women and thereupon

the consequences for the society. The goal of women empowerment is simply providing strength to them. The strength may be giving political or economic authority or provision of health and nutrition of health and nutrition care or social element in the poverty eradication. Empowerment of women, has become an important issue in the startergies of balanced development with social justice. Economic empowerment results in women's ability to influence or make right decision, increase self-confidence better status and role in household etc. The country's first prime minister, Pandit jawarharlal Nehru who said "when women move forward the family moves, the villages moves and the nation moves" employment gives economic status to women, economic status gives way to social status and thereby empowerment" then no one can stop women to grow in our country and take the country along with it to new heights. Therefore if women gains economic strength they gain visibility and voice. The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennia. The history of women in India has been eventful. Women play a vital role in society. Women have contributed in all areas and there are so many examples in all fields. There is a need of time to frame the women empowerment programme at all levels. The great contribution expect from advocacy groups, policymakers, social researchers, health workers, social thinkers and sociologist for the women empowerment. Women Empowerment commission is a tool to eradicate various women problem and provide right track for them. According to the Government of India Report, 'Empowerment means moving from a position of enforced powerlessness to one of power' In this process, women should be empowered socially, economically, educationally and politically that can help them take self-decision regarding education, mobility, economic independency, political participation, public speaking and

awareness to exercise rights. The women's movement and NGOs widespread network of having strong grass-root presence and deep insight into women's concerns have contributed in inspiring initiatives for the women empowerment. Women today are trying to understand their position in the society and have become increasingly aware of sexual inequalities in every sphere of life by seeking ways to fight them with pride and dignity Women empowerment does not mean 'deifying women' rather it means replacing patriarchy with parity. In this regard, there are various facets of women empowerment, such as given hereunder:—

### **Human Rights or Individual Rights**

A woman is a being with senses, imagination and thoughts; she should be able to express them freely. Individual empowerment means to have the self-confidence to articulate and assert the power to negotiate and decide.

### **Social Women Empowerment**

A critical aspect of social empowerment of women is the promotion of gender equality. Gender equality implies a society in which women and men enjoy the same opportunities, outcomes, rights and obligations in all spheres of life.

### **Educational Women Empowerment**

It means empowering women with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process. It means making women aware of their rights and developing a confidence to claim them.

### **Economical and occupational Empowerment**

It implies a better quality of material life through sustainable livelihoods owned and managed by women. It means reducing their financial dependence on their male counterparts by making them a significant part of the human resource.

### **Legal Women Empowerment**

It suggests the provision of an effective legal structure which is supportive of women empowerment. It means addressing the gaps between what the law prescribes and what actually occurs.

### **Political Women Empowerment**

It means the existence of a political system favouring the participation in and control by the women of the political decision-making process and in governance.

Swami Vivekananda, one of the greatest sons of India, quoted that, "There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved, It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing" Therefore, the inclusion of "Women Empowerment" as one of the prime goals in the eight Millennium Development Goals underscores the relevance of this fact. Thus, in order to achieve the status of a developed country, India needs to transform its colossal women force into an effective human resource and this is possible only through the empowerment of women.

## **2. Status of Women in India**

Indian cultural history has a very old and long roots, it can be traced back to thousands of years. Sociologists have analyzed

the status of women from these early ages to the present day by different methods. Scholars have believed that women of ancient India enjoyed equal status with men in all aspects of life. It is evident from all available accounts that in early Vedic society, women occupied the same position as men. Reference to complete gender equality is found in all parts of Vedic literature. Women reached a very high standard of learning and culture, and made all round progress. They could move freely with their husbands or lover, and were employed in a number of professions. Literary women scholars like *Gargi*, *Maitrayi*, *Godha*, *Vishwashraw* were well known and acknowledged for their intellectual and literary abilities. But the status of women starts declining during the period of *Smritis* (period of codification of social laws). During this period women were denied the right to study the Vedas. Marriage or domestic lives become compulsory for women. The Moguls, during their rule, allowed a sudden fall in the dignified position occupied by Indian women. Education for women was stopped and they became victims of evil practices like early child marriage. The Purdah system came into existence. Some social scientists have described the Mogul era as the dark age of women. But worst scenario was about to come, Indian women's position in society further deteriorated during the medieval period when Sati, child marriages and a ban on remarriage by widows became part of social life in some communities in India. Among the Rajputs of Rajasthan, the Jauhar was practiced. In some parts of India, the Devadasis or temple women were sexually exploited. Polygamy was widely practiced, especially among Hindu Kshatriya rulers. Then Britishers arrived in India they listened to the wise counsel of social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Swami Dayanand and they enacted several laws to improve the position of women, to bring back the dignity and glory of women. Later, stalwarts like Mahatma Gandhi and Pt. Nehru advocated women rights. As a result of their concentrated efforts, the status of women in social, economic and political life began to elevate in the Indian society.

### **Current Scenario on Women Empowerment**

Based on the ideas championed by our founding fathers for women empowerment, many social, economic and political provisions were incorporated in the Indian Constitution. Women in India now participate in areas such as education, sports, politics, media, art and culture, service sector and science and technology. But due to the deep-rooted patriarchal mentality in the Indian society, women are still victimized, humiliated, tortured and exploited. Even after almost seven decades of Independence, women are still subjected to discrimination in the social, economic and educational field.

### **Barriers in Women Empowerment**

Many of the barriers to women's empowerment and equity lie ingrained in cultural norms. Many women feel these pressures, while others have become accustomed to being treated inferior to men. The most widespread and dehumanizing discriminations against women are on the basis of the biased perspective. The discrimination against the girl child begins from the birth itself. Boys are preferred over girls; hence, female infanticide is a common practice in India. The ordeal that an Indian girl faces at birth is only the beginning of a lifelong struggle to be seen and heard. The

traditional Indian society is a patriarchal society ruled by the diktats of self-proclaimed caste lords who are the guardians of archaic and unjust traditions. They put the burden of traditions, culture and honour on the shoulders of women and mar their growth. The incidences of "honour killing" reveal the distorted social fibre in the male-dominated society. There are many barriers in the way of female empowerment. They are briefly discussed below:

### **Illiteracy**

Women's illiteracy stands in the way of women's employment in business and commerce, agriculture and industries, both traditional and modern. The proportion of women students has increased steadily after independence and mostly in the last decade. The literacy rate of women has gone up from 8.86 per cent in 1951 to 29.75 per cent to 54.16 per cent in 2001. The 2011 Census report indicates that literacy among women as only 65.46 percent it is virtually disheartening to observe that the literacy rate of women India is even much lower to national average i.e. 74.04. Enrolment of women in higher education has grown since 1995. But these figures are not satisfactory when compared with the enrolment figures of boys. The main hindrance in the women education in India is rural residence, low caste, low economic standing combined with the traditional attitude towards women education as a whole. The growth of women's education in rural areas is very slow. Moreover education is also not available to all equally. Gender inequality is reinforced in education which is proved by the fact that the literacy rate for the women is only 65.46% against 82.14% of men as per 2011 Census. The rate of school drop outs is also found to be comparatively higher in case of women. This higher rate of illiteracy of women is undoubtedly attributing for women dependence on men and to play a subordinate role. The lack of education is the root cause for women's exploitation and negligence

### **Economic Backwardness**

Women constitute only 29% of the workforce but forms majority of the destitute in the country. There has been a failure in transforming the available women base into human resource. This, in turn, has hampered not only the economic development of women but also of the country' as a whole.

### **Unaware of their legal status**

Women are generally not aware of the provisions related to the improvement of their own position. Even if they know about some of the provisions related to their rights of succession, marriage, or family, they do not desire to invoke them. Traditional dominance of the authority of the male parents, husband, and other elder members of the family often restricts the enjoyment of their legal rights by the women. The materialization of these problems still depends largely upon the attitudinal changes in society.

### **Inequality**

Women equality is not universal Women's equality in terms of education, employment, and power is still an individual rather than a universal achievement. The majority of our women are still content to accept an inferior status. This is by and large due to the fact that, although legally women have equal rights with men, there are not enough jobs for women

and working women are not adequately protected from exploitation. The problem essentially is routed in gender disparity in India. Gender disparity manifests itself in various forms, the most obvious being the trend of continuously declining female ratio in the population in the last few decades. Social stereotyping and violence at the domestic and societal levels are some of the other manifestations. Discrimination against girl children, adolescent girls and women persists in parts of the country. The gender disparity can be understood that it exists by looking at the sex ration in India which stands at 933.

### **Implementation Gaps**

Through all these years, the attention is only on developing and devising new schemes, policies and programmes and have paid less attention to the proper monitoring system and implementation short-sightedness, for e.g. despite the presence of The Pre-Natal Diagnostic Technologies Act and various health programmes like Janani Suraksha Yojana and National Rural Health Mission (NHRM), our country has a skewed sex ratio and a high maternal mortality rate (MMR).

### **Loopholes in the legal structure**

Although there are a number of laws to protect women against all sorts of violence yet there has been the significant increase in the episodes of rapes, extortions, acid, attacks etc. This is due to delay in legal procedures and the presence of several loopholes in the functioning of a judicial system.

### **Lack of Political Will**

The still- pending Women's Reservation Bill underscores the lack of political will to empower women politically. The male dominance prevails in the politics of India and women are forced to remain mute spectators.

### **Poverty**

Due to immense poverty of the majority of the Indian population, the opportunity of education, participation in social and civic life are thus restricted to women belonging to the upper and middle layers of society. Due to abject poverty, women are exploited as domestic helps and wives whose incomes are usurped by the man of the house. If poverty were not a concern, then the girl child will be able to follow her dreams without concerns of sexual exploitation, domestic abuse and no education or work.

### **Health and Safety**

The health and safety concerns of women are paramount for the wellbeing of a country, and are important factors in gauging the empowerment of women in a country. However there are alarming concerns where maternal healthcare is concerned. While there are several programs that have been set into motion by the Government and several NGOs in the country, there is still a wide gap that exists between those under protection and those not. Poverty and illiteracy add to these complications with local quacks giving ineffective and downright harmful remedies to problems that women have. The empowerment of women begins with a guarantee of their health and safety

### **Role and Importance of Woman**

Traditionally, an Indian woman had four fold status-role

sequences. These were her role as a daughter, wife, housewife (homemaker), and mother. The woman, whose status and role traditionally was well defined and almost fixed in the society, is now experiencing far-reaching changes. The woman in modern times is entering into certain new fields that were unknown to the woman's sphere of role-sets. They are activating participating in social, economic, and political activities

### **Women's role in society**

Women can help the society in various ways. They can engage in social activities and work for the betterment of the society. Young educated girls can get engaged in a profession of her choice. We need more doctors, engineers, software developers, and social workers. The world cannot grow at good pace unless women come forward and take initiative for the development works. They can contribute enormously in the field of health care. Women education will also improve the level of sanitation and hygiene. As a mother, her role in the development of the emotional psychological aspect of the new born child has been also very significant. She was not only the creator and maintainer of her child but an educator and disciplinarian as well. The woman is now an important instrument of social change. The extent of woman's participation in the corporate life is thus the measure of social change in India. The women of the present generation have generally received higher education than the women of their preceding generation. There have been far reaching consequences in the economic status of their families.

### **Women's role in politics**

Education of women has not only helped them to become aware of the political problems, but they are gradually becoming active participants in the political life. Some are enrolling themselves as members of political parties, attending party meetings, conventions, and carrying out political programs. Some women are attaining influential political stature of their own and have become instrumental in shaping the public opinion for the betterment of women's conditions in society.

### **Participation of Women in Socio-economic activities**

The woman in modern times is entering into certain new fields that were unknown to the woman's sphere of role-sets. These are the woman's participation in economic, political, and social life. The modern woman keenly desires to enter into a work career because of the pressing economic needs of the family. In middle class families, much emphasis is given to the maintenance of high standard of living. To fulfill the economic needs of the family and to achieve higher standard of living the woman participates in economic activities.

### **Rural women**

Gandhiji's vision that women must play an equal and important role in national development. However, the movement for raising the socio-economic status of women had involved generally the middle-class educated women in major urban centers while the great mass of rural women are yet to enjoy the rights and privileges as enshrined in the Constitution.

### **Economic Benefits**

Women Empowerment also leads to more economic benefits Not to the individuals but to the society as well. Unlike earlier days when they stayed at home only and do only kitchen stuffs, nowadays, they roam outside and also earns money like the male members of the society. Women empowerment helps women to stand on their own legs, become independent and also to earn for their family which grows country's economy. For a general idea on how an empowered women can impact an s53 percent higher returns on equity, 24 percent higher returns on sales and 67 percent higher returns 1 (OECD, 2008). This study shows the impact women can have on the overall economic benefits of a company. If implemented on a global scale, the inclusion of women in the formal workforce (like a Fortune 500 company) can increase the economic output of a nation. Therefore, women can also help businesses grow and economies prosper if they have, and if they are able to use, the right knowledge and skills in their employment

### **Reduction in domestic violence**

Women Empowerment leads to decrease in domestic violence. Uneducated women are at higher risk for domestic violence than an educated women.

### **Reduction in corruption**

Women Empowerment is also advantageous in case of corruption. Women empowerment helps women to get educated and know their rights and duties and hence can stop corruption.

### **Reduce Poverty**

Women Empowerment also reduces poverty. Sometimes, the money earned by the male member of the family is not sufficient to meet the demands of the family. The added earnings of women helps the family to come out of poverty trap.

### **National Development**

Women are increasingly participating in the national development process. They are making the nation proud by their outstanding performances almost every spheres including medical science, social service, engineering, etc.

### **3. Suggestions**

- Women should be allowed to work and should be provided enough safety and support to work.
- Women should have access to resources, rights and entitlements. They should be given decision-making powers and due position in governance. Thus, the Women Reservation Bill should be passed as soon as possible to increase the effective participation of women in the politics of India.
- Government or community-based `bodies must be set up to monitor the programmes devised for the welfare of the society. Due importance should be given for their proper implementation and their monitoring and evaluation through social audits.
- Justice delayed is justice denied. Efforts should be made to restructure the legal process to deliver fair and in- time

justice to the victims of heinous crimes like rapes, acid attacks, sexual harassment, trafficking and domestic violence. The idea of fast-track courts, devised to impart speedy justice to the victims of rapes and other crimes against women, is a good initiative taken by the judiciary and the Government of India.

- Empowerment of women could only be achieved if their economic and social status is improved by adopting definite social and economic policies with a view for bringing phenomenal change in the plight women's education and empowerment in India -
- Steps should be taken to improve the health status of women, reduce maternal mortality especially in the areas which do not have good medical facilities.
- Awareness programmes need to be organized for creating awareness among women especially belonging to weaker sections about their rights.
- Strict implementation of programs and acts should be there to curb the mal-practices prevalent in the society.
- The Ministry of Education both at Centre and State level should work out strategic steps to stop firmly the ongoing high drop outs among girls especially in rural areas to realize zero drop-out among girls.

#### 4. Conclusion

Empowering women socially, economically, educationally politically and legally is going to be a Herculean task. It is not going to be easy to change the culture of disregard for women which are so deep-rooted in Indian society. But it does not mean that it is implausible. Only revolutions bring changes in a day, but reforms take their time. This one, in particular, will take its time as well. The idea of women empowerment might sound hard by the yard, but by the inch, it is just a cinch. All we need is a concentrated effort focused in the right direction that would rest only with the liberation of women from all forms of evil. The vision behind the Government declaration 2001 as the year of women empowerment is to provide women equal partnership with men and to enable them to exercise their full control over their own actions. The efforts of the Government are still inadequate and the process of empowering women in India has a long way go. We have to keep in mind that the whole sky will never show the 'glitter' till the gloom and darkness of 'half of the sky' is disengaged. There is need for complete abolition of social practices such as dowry, sati, female infanticide, permanent widowhood, child marriage and many more. There are many people and organizations working including the Government that are working for improving the social and economic position of women.

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