

**CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN
INDIA**

***Ms. Poonam**

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to examine the status of women in India and provides some policy suggestions. Status of women would become more relevant if women are educated, better informed and can take rational decisions. It is important to conduct in changes in public attitudes and perceptions with regard to the role of women in different spheres of life. Adjustments have to be made in traditional gender specific performance of tasks. This is fact that development of women has always been the central focus of planning since independence. Environment is a noteworthy advance toward this path however it must be found in a relational context. A clear vision is needed to remove the obstacles to the path of women's freedom both from the government and women themselves. Efforts should be coordinated towards all round improvement of every single segment of Indian ladies by giving them their due offer. One of the key challenges to promoting gender equality is gathering accurate information about women's conditions, responsibilities and needs. This type of information and reporting is often perceived as soft data due to its qualitative nature. A mechanism must be found to value the qualitative information in addition to the quantitative data. Statistical data must be accessible to community based organizations and reflective of women's social and economic reality. We need to develop innovative ways of working with the community to determine what strategies and best practices work for all women and the whole society. It is a fundamental issue to the ability of women to participate in the work force and other roles in the community.

Key Words: *Women Empowerment*

Introduction

Improved conditions and opportunities for women and gender equality are crucial to international efforts to boost social and economic development. The Beijing agenda of 1995 covers 12 critical areas relating to women, including poverty, health, violence and inequalities

*Assistant Professor, Ganga Institute of Education, Jhajjar, Email: poonamtholia@gmail.com 33

between women and men in their access to a wide range of social and economic opportunities. To measure women's empowerment now Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) takes 3 indicators i.e. women's participation in economic, political and professional activities. Inside political power what are measured are for the most part ladies in parliament, legal or in local bodies. Women's empowerment or disempowerment has to be seen in all areas physical, socio cultural religious, political legal and economic.

It is likewise now regularly called attention to that women empowerment must be viewed as a procedure wherein we should think about women mindfulness awareness, decisions with live options, assets available to them, voice, office and interest. These are all related to enhancement of women's capabilities and decisions they take individually or collectively for themselves.

The past three decades have witnessed a steadily increasing awareness of the need to empower women through measures to increase social, economic and political equity and broader access to fundamental human rights, improvements in nutrition, basic health and education. Alongside attention to the subordinate status of women has come the idea of sexual orientation as a general socio-cultural variable, found in connection to different elements, for example race, class, age and ethnicity. Gender is not synonymous with women, nor is it a zero-sum game implying loss for men; rather, it refers to both women and men and to their status, relative to each other. Sexual orientation equity alludes to that phase of human social improvement at which the rights, obligations and chances of people won't be controlled by the reality of being conceived male or female, at the end of the day, a phase when the two men and ladies understand their maximum capacity. This paper is an attempt to examine the status of women empowerment in India and gives some policy suggestions. Empowerment would become more relevant if women are educated, better informed and can take rational decisions. It is important to conduct in changes in public attitudes and perceptions with regard to the role of women in different spheres of life. Adjustments have to be made in traditional gender specific performance of tasks.

II Present Status of Women Empowerment

Empowerment of women is basically the procedure of upliftment of financial, social and political status of women, the generally underprivileged ones, in the society. It is the process of guarding them against all forms of violence. Kofi Annan takes violence against women as the most shameful of human rights violation. According to Kofi Annan, “violence against women takes various forms such as: domestic violence, rape, trafficking in women, forced prostitution and violence in armed conflict (such as murder, systematic rape, sexual slavery and forced pregnancy) and honour killings, dowry related violence, female infanticide and parental sex selection in favour of male babies, female genital mutilation and other harmful practices and traditions.”¹ Women empowerment includes the working up of a society, a political situation, wherein women can breathe without the dread of mistreatment, abuse, anxiety, segregation and the general sentiment oppression which runs with being a woman in a customarily male commanded structure. Deepa Narayan² takes empowerment as the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives.

Gender imbalances in financial life additionally turn into a causal factor in the perpetual destitution of all family individuals, not simply of women, in poor families and the intergenerational proliferation of neediness. Norms about child marriage of girls, gender biases against girls education, women’s limited mobility, women’s lack of control over fertility decisions, gender gaps in wages and employment, all contribute to difficulties of escaping poverty intergenerational through vicious cycles between poverty and gender inequalities.

Gender inequalities in economic life also become a causal factor in the chronic poverty of all household members, not just of women, in poor households and the intergenerational reproduction of poverty. Norms about child marriage of girls, gender biases against girls education, women’s limited mobility, women’s lack of control over fertility decisions, gender gaps in wages and employment, all contribute to difficulties of escaping poverty intergenerationally through vicious cycles between poverty and gender inequalities.

*Assistant Professor, Ganga Institute of Education, Jhajjar

In recognition of the importance of establishing gender equality around the world, the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) was established as a separate fund within the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in 1984. At that time, the General Assembly instructed it to “ensure women’s involvement with mainstream activities.”³ The Platform of Action resulting from the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women expanded this concept, calling it ‘gender mainstreaming’ i.e. the application of gender perspectives to all legal and social norms and standards, to all policy development, research, planning, advocacy, development, implementation and monitoring as a mandate for all member states.⁴ In this way, the gender factor is no longer to be only a supplement to development but central to the practice of development. As a result of the Beijing conference and the many years of work leading up to it more than 100 countries announced new initiatives to improve the status of women.

Despite worldwide evidence confirmation of the low levels of female interest in social, instructive, financial and political circles, there is as yet an inclination to consider it to be a genuine issue just in a set number of countries. Yet, the reality is that no country in the world, no matter how advanced, has achieved true gender equality, as measured by comparable decision making power, equal opportunity for education and advancement, and equivalent support and status in all strolls of human undertaking. Gender disparities exist, even in countries without glaring male-domination, and measuring these disparities is a necessary step towards implementing corrective policies.

III Global Gender Gap

Moreover, the risk increases for society as a whole that the next generation of children will be similarly ill-prepared. If, as a broad body of empirical work has shown, education and literacy reduce mortality rates of children including the bias toward female child mortality and help reduce fertility rates,⁵ the importance of literacy for women is all the greater, considering that women still constitute two-thirds of the world’s illiterate population.⁶

Health and well-being is a concept related to the substantial differences between women and men in their access to sufficient nutrition, healthcare and reproductive facilities and to issues of fundamental safety and integrity of person. According to the World Health Organization, 585,000 women die every year, over 1,600 every day, from causes related to pregnancy and childbirth.⁷ The Planned Parenthood Federation of America quotes estimates that of the annual 46 million abortions worldwide, some 20 million are performed unsafely, resulting in the deaths of 80,000 women from complications, accounting for at least 13% of global maternal mortality, and causing a wide range of long term health problems.⁸

Most of the women work in agricultural sector either as workers, in household farms or as waged workers. Yet it is precisely livelihood in agriculture that has tended to become more volatile and insecure in recent years and women cultivators have therefore been negatively affected. The government's policies for alleviating poverty have failed to produce any desirable results, as women do not receive appropriate wages for their labour. There is also significant amount of unpaid or non-marketed labour within the household. The increase in gender disparity in wages in the urban areas is also quite marked as it results from the employment of women in different and lower paying activities. They are exploited at various levels. They should be given appropriate wages and work at standard with men so their status can be raised in society.

IV Strategies for Women Empowerment

Political Participation:

Women's political participation has been considered a major measure of women's empowerment. In recent years there have been explicit moves to increase women's political participation. The women's reservation policy bill is however a sad story as it is repeatedly being scuttling in parliament. In the Panchayati Raj system, however, women have been given representation as a sign of political empowerment. There are many elected women representatives at the village council level. However, their power is restricted, as it the men who wield all the authority. It is crucial to train and give real power to these women leaders so that they can catalyst change in their villages regarding women. All this shows that the process of

gender equality and women's empowerment still has a long way to go and may even have become more difficult in the recent years.

The main reason for the contradiction is that, targeted schemes tend to have only limited impact when the basic thrust of development is not reaching an average woman, making her life more fragile and vulnerable. To make a positive change basic infrastructure should be provided in every village and city. To begin with, providing safe drinking water supply and better sanitation not only directly improved the lives and health of women but also reduces their workload in terms of provisioning and ensuring such facilities. An access to affordable cooking fuel reduces the need to travel long distances in search of fuel wood. Improved transport connecting villages with each other and with towns can also directly improve living conditions as well as unpaid labour time spent in transporting household items. It can also lead to access to a wider range of goods and services plus a better access to health facilities. Expenditure on food subsidy and better provisions for public distribution services directly affects the lives of women and girl children in terms of adequate nutrition.

The World Economic Forum (2005)⁹, in its first gender gap study placed India at 5th position among 58 nations, which shows a significant gap in male and female achievements. In the same study, the rank of India in terms of political empowerment was 24th at both primary and grassroots level. The National Population Policy 2000 specifically identified the low status of women in India as an important barrier to the achievement of goals towards maternal and child welfare.¹⁰

The patterns of resource mobilization by government also have significant effects on women that are usually not recognized. When taxes are regressive and fall disproportionately on items of mass consumption, once again these tend to affect women more. This is not only because the consumption of such items may be curtailed but also because the provisioning of such items is frequently considered to be the responsibility of the women of the household. Also credit policies reduce the flow of credit to small scale enterprises, thus reducing the employment

opportunities for women. There is a need to have women friendly economic policies that can enhance their social and economic position and make them self-reliant.

Broadly there may be two ways for bringing about gender equality and women empowerment – (a) through inducting women in the mainstream of development and assuring their access to productive assets and (b) through legislation for ensuring them equal social and political status and assuring their participation in political decision making and thus providing them a platform for venting their grievances , integrating their issues into the mainstream of the decision making process and fighting for the cause of female community in general and of the poor and oppressed women in the society in particular. However, in both the strategies providing education is the crucial link which holds the key.

Development strategy for empowerment will mainly be concerned with employment and asset generation coupled with skill oriented education and vocational training. A preconceived development strategy studded with emphasis on employment, education, health, nutrition, sanitation etc, critical elements that contribute to the quality of human life, more so in the rural sector, may prove to be effective in the long run to raise the status of women but in men dominated societies with social and political institutions biased in favour of gender discrimination, may not prove to be effective enough to take them out of the downward gravitational pull. Economic empowerment can be a handy tool in as much as enabling a woman to lead a graceful existence in her family and society but may not prove too potent a weapon in the larger more grim battle against social, political and even economic oppression, which warrants collective strength. In a democratic setup collective strength emanates from political participation. One major therapy prescribed by woman empowerment advocates is empowering women through legislation for ensuring participation in political decision making.

Such an approach provides the women with a constitutional platform to stand up to men, to raise their voice on issues concerning women oppression, subjugation and related issues and thus in effect, providing them with an identity in an orthodox male dominated socio-political set

up, in addition to providing a much needed forum to seek redressal of problems directly affecting them: the true essence of empowerment.

Education:

Women's education is extremely important intrinsically as it is their human right and required for the flourishing of many of their capacities. It is, however, noticed that most programmes for education of girls and women in India have reinforced gender roles specially motherhood in curriculum as well as impact evaluation.

Empowerment of women is closely related to formal and informal sources of education. Late 19th century & 20th century reformers advocated women's education as a principal strategy to answer the women's question. In UP, a renewal process of correcting gender stereotyping was initiated in 1998 looking at textbooks and training besides infrastructure and community mobilization. There is marked improvement in girls' enrollment and steady decline in dropout rates.

It has been apparent that parental apathy or opposition to girl child education is fast reading even in traditional male dominated states of north Indian. Given the right infrastructure- schools located in neighborhoods, preferably with female teachers parents would allow girls to study 'as long as they would like to'. It may however be noticed as evidenced by researchers, the same families who are willing to see girls in college react violently if the girl decides to choose her partner in marriage or challenge other norms of feminine behavior.

Health:

2005-06 National Family Health Survey (NFHS -3) conducted through 18 research organizations between 2005 December and August 2006 provides us with several important data based insights not provided by earlier surveys. There has been a steady increase in institutional delivery percentages from NFHS - 1 to 3 from 26 to 41 the increase in rural from 17 to 31 is more promising than urban from 58 to 69. Overall fertility rate has declined from 3.4 to 2.7. The states of Punjab and Maharashtra have reached the replacement level of fertility, i.e. around 2 children per woman. Women in Chhattisgarh and Orissa are expected to have an average of

about 2.5 children at current fertility rates. The urban areas in five states studied by NFHS, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Orissa and Punjab have reached below replacement level fertility. There is a difference between the fertility of women with no education and those with 10 or more years of schooling. Trends in antenatal care have remained more or less constant in NFHS – 1 and 2 between rural and urban women but have increased from 65 to 77% total. The five state studies show regional imbalances in post natal care from only 23 per cent in Chhattisgarh to 54-59 per cent in Maharashtra, Punjab and Gujarat.

More than 40% ever married women and about one third men in Orissa and Gujarat are thin for their height, under nutrition is much lower in Punjab (12-14%) obesity is the major problem in Punjab 38% women are overweight. Overweight or obese women percentage has increased in the last 7 years from 16 to 20 per cent in Gujarat from 12 to 17 per cent in Maharashtra and from 4 to 7 per cent in Orissa. The extent of overweight is greater in women than men. Overall 14.8% women are obese. Except in Punjab in the other states more than 50 per cent of the children of women without any education are underweight.

The percentage of anemia ranges from 38% in Punjab to 63% in Orissa. Anaemia prevalence is alarming among pregnant women 57.9 which are more than last recorded 49.7%. 33% of women still have BMI below normal, which has declined from 36.2. IMR has gone down but gender differences persist. This is true also of under 5 mortality. Life expectancy of women however stands a level higher than that of men. From 1961 to 2001 both in total population as well as in the population of 0-6 there has been a decline in sex ratio from 943 to 935 and 976 to 927 respectively. There is a fear that overall reduction of state resources in the welfare sector and especially less than 1% investment in health is going to exacerbate the existing gender bias in society.

Ownership of Land:

A recent legislation of the Central Government, the Hindu succession Amendment Act 2005 has also moved towards women's equality in property rights. It makes Hindu women's inheritance rights in agricultural land legally equal to those of men. All daughters including married daughters' age co-parceners in joint family properly daughters now have the right to claim

partition and to become 'Karta'. All daughters, married or unmarried can reside, seek partition of the parental dwelling place. This law of the centre well has the power to displace any conflicting laws of the state which are unequal to women. This is a far reaching message to assure women control over property.

Violence:

The questions regarding crimes against women are most entrenched, as most of them are committed within the family NCRB records that the highest percentage of crime against women is torture (37.7%) followed by Molestation (22.4%), Rape (11.8%), Kidnapping (8.8%) and immoral traffic (3.7%). 4.6 Dowry Death and 6.5% eve teasing were recorded. the further details report that in victims of rape 532 were below 10 and 1090 below 14. 3189 within ages of 30-50. No age is safe for women. In U.P. nearly 32% crimes against women were committed within the family by husbands and relatives. This figure when compounded with 12% dowry deaths makes 45% of crimes domestically located. Incidents of honour killings and battery through not large are often threats to women's functioning and their emotional development is severely blighted.

V Conclusion

This is fact that development of women has always been the central focus of planning since independence. Empowerment is a major step in this direction but it has to be seen in a relational context. A clear vision is needed to remove the obstacles to the path of women's freedom both from the government and women themselves. Efforts should be directed towards all round development of each and every section of Indian women by giving them their due share.

Women need to take a stand on decisions that are hurtful to women, families and communities. It is felt that problems stemming from decisions made by Government need to be challenged. This means showing low tolerance for inequality and changing the political process by bringing to light problems such as the lack of government accountability.

One of the key challenges to promoting gender equality is gathering accurate information about women's conditions, responsibilities and needs. This type of information and reporting is often perceived as soft data due to its qualitative nature. A mechanism must be found to value the qualitative information in addition to the quantitative data. Statistical data must be accessible to community based organizations and reflective of women's social and economic reality. We need to develop innovative ways of working with the community to determine what strategies and best practices work for all women and the whole society. It is a fundamental issue to the ability of women to participate in the work force and other roles in the community.

Endnotes

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