

## “WOMEN EMPOWERMENT – ISSUES AND CHALLENGES”

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### ABSTRACT

Women population is around 50% of the total population of the world. They have every right to be treated equally with men in every sphere of life and society. Women Empowerment refers to the creation of an environment for women where they can make decisions of their own for their personal benefits as well as for the society. Today the empowerment of women has become one of the most important concerns of 21<sup>st</sup> century. But practically women empowerment is still an illusion of reality. We observe in our day to day life how women become victimized by various social evils. Women Empowerment is the vital instrument to expand women's ability to have resources and to make strategic life choices. Empowerment of women is essentially the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. It is the process of guarding them against all forms of violence. It involves the building up of a society, a political environment, wherein women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being a woman in a traditionally male dominated structure. Though women constitute half of the population, India has shown disproportionate sex ratio whereby female's population has been comparatively lower than males. As far as their social status is concerned, they are not treated as equal to men in all the places. Gender disabilities and discriminations are found in India even today. The paradoxical situation has such that she was sometimes concerned as Goddess and at other times merely as slave. Thus, the present paper emphasizes on the process of Empowerment, and the challenges and hurdles in this process. It also presents some measures to overcome the present challenges and hurdles.

**Key Words:** Empowerment, Women Empowerment, challenges, hurdles, issues, discrimination

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*“Woman is a companion of man gifted with equal mental capacities, she has the right to participate in minutest details of the activities of man; and she has the same right to freedom and liberation as of man”*

**Mahatma Gandhi**

Wonderful gift of nature

Originator of life

Monitor of external and internal affairs

Emotional Incarnation

Nightingale in the garden of Humanity

Woman is often described as the better half of man. And they constitute almost half of the population in the world. But the hegemonic masculine ideology made them suffer a lot as they were denied equal opportunities in different parts of the world. The rise of feminist ideas has, however, led to the tremendous improvement of women's condition throughout the world in recent times. This paper attempts to look into the issues and challenges which confronts today's women and in the process of women empowerment.

### **CONCEPT OF EMPOWERMENT**

The Latin prefix “en” or “em” meaning to give underscores the dependency relationship between the persons being empowered and the persons doing the empowering.

The most conspicuous feature of the term empowerment is that it contains the word ‘power’. It may be broadly defined as control over material assets, intellectual resources and ideology. **The process of challenging existing power relations and of gaining greater control over the sources of power may be termed as empowerment.**

**Women are generally powerless because;**

They usually don't own assets. Even if they have assets, they don't have any control over their use. For example, many women have jewellery which is an asset. But they cannot sell it without the permission of their husband parents- in- law, etc.

They don't have very good access to knowledge and information. Many women are not even literates. They are not educated fully. Many of them don't have access to the outside world.

Many women feel shy to speak, to think independently analyze problems and come to conclusions. They are not in a position to take charge of their lives.

They are not allowed to have any independent opinions. From childhood, they are made dependent on males. They are taught that they should not take independent decisions and should not hold strong beliefs. They should be submissive.

### **FACTORS WHICH CONTRIBUTE TO POWERLESSNESS:**

Low social status due to traditional social structure, class and caste, religious discrimination, unequal access to resources

- ✚ Patriarchal System- men control assets. Men are more important.
- ✚ Denial of opportunities like education, employment or asset ownership
- ✚ No independent access to resources, markets and extension services

In short, the powerlessness is due to a complex mix of factors - historical, cultural, social, economic and political.

Hence the empowerment process of women has to tackle various factors. Empowerment of women could be in any sphere of life – legal, social, political or economic.

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT**

The concept of women empowerment originates from the idea of the Brazilian educationist **Paulo Freire**.

Women Empowerment is not merely important but crucial if development is to be sustainable. The concept of women empowerment was introduced at the international women conference at NAROI in 1985.

Women empowerment is a social process that neutralizes women's oppression. If women do not take decisive action, their victimization will continue through their traditional subordination. The term Empowerment is frequently used to describe a process where the powerless gain greater share of control over resources and decision making, and women are generally accepted as being the most powerless members of the oppressed classes.

The usual strategy adopted to empower women could be broadly classified into three categories:

1. Integrated development approach
2. Economic Approach
3. Consciousness raising cum organizing approach.

### **WOMEN EMPOWERMENT- STILL AN ILLUSION OF REALITY:**

Notwithstanding the remarkable changes in the position of women in free India, there is still a great divergence between the constitutional position and stark reality of deprivation and degradation. Whatever whiff of emancipation has blown in Indian society, has been inhaled and enjoyed by the urban women, their population belonging to the rural areas are still totally untouched by the wind of changes. They still have been living in miserable conditions, steeped in poverty, ignorance, superstition and slavery. There still exists a wide gulf between the goals enunciated in the Constitution, legislations, policies, plans, programmes and related mechanisms on the one hand and the situational reality on the status of women in India, on the other. The human rights scenario in the country continues to be dismal and depressing. Women are being brutalized, commodified, materialized and subjected to inhuman exploitation and discrimination. Although, gender discrimination has been banned by the Constitution and women have been guaranteed political equality with men, yet there is a difference between the constitutional rights and the rights enjoyed in reality by women. Even after half a century of independence, barring a few exceptions, women have mostly remained outside the domain of power and political authority. Although they constitute about half of the citizen and over the years their participation by way of voting has increased, yet their participation and representation in law making and law implementing bodies are not very satisfactory. No doubt the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment acts have provided access to women in the decision making process at the grass-root level but their representation in the Parliament and state legislatures is woefully poor. Insecurity does not allow the women leaders to identify leadership at the grass-root level. In politics when a man proposes, they themselves depose. In reality women representatives are ornamental in nature and political consciousness is found lacking among them. They are affected by the caste and class divisions, feudal attitudes, patriarchal nature of the family and village-social, environmental, ethnic, religious separatism and the like. They are members on record only.

Allegedly, they are not consulted while taking decision. Thus, women representatives are not free from male dominance in the village administration and no significant change in the power equal is observed in the villages.

In these days of scam-ridden politics, the increasing role of money and mafia in elections keeps most of the women away from politics. Increasing violence and vulgarity against them intimates women and consequently they prefer to stay out of politics. Issues may be various and varied,

**however a few basic issues deserve specific mention:**

- Lack of awareness
- Lack of social and economic empowerment
- Lack of political will
- Feebleness of accountability mechanisms
- Lack of enforcement by the police force
- Lack of gender culture

### **CHALLENGES AND ISSUES IN THE PROCESS OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT**

There are many challenges that are currently plaguing the issues of women's rights in India. A lot of issues are redundant and quite basic which has been faced across the country; they are contributory causes to the overarching status of women in India. Targeting these issues will directly benefit the empowerment of women in India.

#### **• EDUCATION**

While the country has grown from leaps and bounds since its independence the gap between women and men education is severe. In comparison to 82.14% of adult educated men, only 65.46% of adult literate women are there in India. Additionally, the norm of culture that states that the man of the family is the be-all and end-all of family's decisions is gradually deteriorating the Indian society. Eradicating this gap and educating women about their real place in the world is a step that will largely set this entire movement rolling down the hill to crash and break the wall of intolerance, negligence and exploitation.

- **POVERTY IN THE COUNTRY**

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

- **WOMEN AND WORK**

The situation of women on economic front is no better and men still enjoy a larger share of the cake. The majority of women earn on an average about three fourths pay of males for the same work, outside the agriculture sector, in both the developed and developing countries. In most countries, women work approximately twice the unpaid time men do. The work of women is not measured in quantitative terms and is not valued in national and international accounts. Women's contribution to development is seriously underestimated and thus its social recognition is limited. In India the situation

- **GIRL CHILD**

Decline in the number of females world over is an indicator of the discrimination against the females, right from the birth. The reasons for this discrepancy include, among other things, harmful attitudes and practices such as female genital mutilation, son preference – which results in female infanticide and pre natal sex selection using techniques like amniocentesis, chorion

biopsy and ultra sound. The phenomenon of preference for male child has reached alarming proportions in India. The son is still is the man who will carry on the name of the family and take care of the parents in their old age, while the girl is unwanted, ignored, unrecognized and simply discarded.

### CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS FOR EMPOWERING WOMEN IN INDIA

- ▶ Equality before law for all persons (Article-14).
- ▶ Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth (Article 15 (I)).
- ▶ However, special provisions may be made by the state in favors of women and children Article 15(3).
- ▶ Equality of opportunity for all citizens relating to employment or appointment to any office under the state (Article 16).
- ▶ State policy to be directed to securing for men and women equally the right to an adequate means of livelihood (Article 39(a); (v) equal pay for equal work for both men and women (Article 39(d)).
- ▶ Provisions to be made by the state for securing just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief (Article 42).
- ▶ Promotion of harmony by every citizen of India and renouncement of such practices which are derogatory to the dignity of women Article 51A(e).
- ▶ Reservation of not less than one-third of total seats for women in direct election to local bodies, viz. Panchayats and Municipalities (Articles 343(d) and 343 (T)).

### MEASURES TO OVERCOME CHALLENGES AND HURDLES:

- There should be a better and fuller understanding of the problems peculiar to woman, to make a solution of those problems possible. As these problems centre round the basic problem of inequality, steps should be taken to promote equality of treatment and full integration of woman in the total development effort of the country.
- Women must become literate, as education is beneficial for them as well as their families. The family web is woven around the women. She has to be up to the mark and educated so that she could fend for herself and her family during the hour of crisis. The status of women would

improve only if they educate themselves and grab every opportunity to become stronger and more powerful than before.

- The state must pass and enforce legislation so that the status of women in society is brought to a respectable level through the long arms of the law.
- There is a need for a change of values and behaviour in the society, a need for positive socio-cultural and economic empowerment. Education can play a vital role in bringing about the desirable behavioural changes among the women and make them well equipped in terms of knowledge, competence and capacity to deal with different political problems.
- Governments should establish mechanisms to accelerate women's equal participation and equitable representation at all levels of the political process and public life in each community and society and enable women to articulate their concerns and needs and ensure the full and equal participation of women in decision-making processes in all spheres of life.
- Governments and civil society should take actions to eliminate attitudes and practices that discriminate against and subordinate girls and women and that reinforce gender inequality.
- Governments should take measures to promote the fulfillment of girls' and women's potential through education, skills development and the eradication of illiteracy for all girls and women without discrimination of any kind, giving paramount importance to the elimination of poverty and ill health.
- Governments, in collaboration with civil society, should take the necessary measures to ensure universal access, on the basis of equality between women and men, to appropriate, affordable and quality health care for women throughout their life cycle.
- Governments should take every possible action to remove all gender gaps and inequalities pertaining to women's livelihoods and participation in the labour market through the creation of employment with secure incomes, which has been shown to advance women's empowerment and enhance their reproductive health.
- Legislation ensuring equal pay for equal work or for work of equal value should be instituted and enforced.

## CONCLUSION:

In concluding this paper it can be said that despite all achievements in India and the world, the situation of women is still pitiable and there is an urgent need of strict laws, a sensitive judiciary,



effective enforcement, proper infrastructure facilities and vigilant women's groups to achieve the objectives of women's development. Empowerment of women is therefore the process of controlling power and strengthening of their vitality. Empowerment is a phenomenon of nineties and strategies revolve around education, health, skill development and income generation. The government has been doing a lot for overall improvement of the women's condition but our attitude still remains one of the discrimination and injustice against women.

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