

## **WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA - A OVERVIEW**

*“Women are the builders and moulders of nation’s destiny. Though delicate and soft as lily, she has a heart, far stronger and bolder than of man.....she is supreme inspiration of man’s onward march”, - Rabindranatha Tagore*

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### **ABSTRACT**

In the history of human development, woman has been as important as man. The hands that rock the cradle may rule the world of success and play a prominent role in the development of a nation. In fact, the social, the economical and the political status of women in the society are the true indicators of a nation’s overall progress. The active participation of women in the crucial fields such as economical, social and political is a key drive of their empowerment. Empowerment is a process aimed at changing the nature and direction of systematic forces, which marginalize women and the deprived sections in a given context. Women’s empowerment in India is heavily dependent on numerous variables that include geographical location, educational status, societal status, ages, etc. The policies and the programmes on women’s empowerment prevail at local, state and national levels covering the essential programmes such as health, education, economic opportunities, social awareness, and political participation. In this regard, The National Mission for Empowerment of Women (NMEW) was launched by the Government of India on International Women’s Day in 2010 with the aim to strengthen overall processes that promote all-round development of women. Mahatma Gandhi affirms that ‘the status of women would not change merely by bringing legislations; it must be supported by change in the women’s social circumstances and situations and also man’s sexiest attitude to women’. As such, women’s empowerment requires bold and sustainable action to advance opportunities and rights of women and to ensure that women can participate and be heard. This article attempts to spread a light on the importance of women’s empowerment and celestial empowerment policies, plans and programs initiated by Government and Non-government organizations to make them economically, socially and politically viable.

**Key words:** *Women empowerment, Socio-economic-political status, plans and programs, Women’s participation*

## Introduction

Empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, social, economical and political strengths 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 on their own
- Having access to information and resources for taking proper decisions
- 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 initiate and
- Increasing one's positive self-image and overcoming stigma

Empowerment also related to the process of internal change (**Mayoux 1998**) and to the capacity and right to make strategic decision (**Kabeer 2001**). It consists of change, choice and power. It is a process of change by which individuals or groups with little or no power gain the ability to make choices that affect their lives. Empowerment is the feeling that activates the psychological energy to accomplish one's goal (**Indiresan 1999**).

In the history of human development, woman has been as important as man. The hands that rock the cradle may rule the world of success and play a prominent role in the development of a nation. In fact, the social, the economical and the political status of women in the society are the true indicators of a nation's overall progress. Without the active participation of women in national activities, the social, economical or political progress of a country will be stagnated. In the universe, women constitute 50 percent of the population contributing two-thirds of the world's work hour. Though, they contribute two-thirds of the world's workforce, their economical earnings are meager and accounts to only one-third of the total income and owns less than one-tenth of the world's resources. This clearly shows that the economical viability of the

women is in a pathetic condition and this is more so in a country like ours. Among the total Indian population of 1027.10 million (as per 2001 census) women constitute 495.73 million. Therefore, 'women constitute nearly 50 percent of the population, perform two-thirds of the work and produce 50 percent of food commodities consumed by the country. They earn one-third of remuneration and own 10 percent of the property or wealth of the country (Reddy 1994).

Women's empowerment can be attained through one or many ways. Each one of the ways plays a significant role in modeling of women in every strata of the population. Empowerment of women may be economic empowerment, social empowerment or political empowerment.

### **Economical Empowerment of Women**

Women have a great potentiality to change their own economic status as well as that of the communities and countries in which they live. India is one of the world's fastest growing economies, with women mainly from middle class increasingly entering the workforce. Unban corporate hubs like Delhi, Kolkata and Bangalore have seen an influx of young women from semi-urban and rural parts of the country, living alone and redefining themselves. However, the story of economic empowerment for women is not a singular narrative, rather is located in a complex set of caste, class, religious and ethnic identities.

**Eyben R (Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Brighton)** opines that, 'economic empowerment is the capacity of women and men to participate in, contribute to and benefit from growth processes in ways which recognize the value of their contributions, respect their dignity and make it possible to negotiate a fairer distribution of the benefits of growth'. Economic empowerment increases women's access to economic resources and opportunities including jobs, financial services, property and other productive assets, skills development and market information.

Women's economic participation and empowerment are fundamental to strengthening women's rights and enabling women to have control over their lives and exerts influence in society (Sweden, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, - 2010, On Equal Footing: Policy for Gender Equality and

the Rights and Role of Women in Sweden's International Development Cooperation 2010-2015, MFA, Stockholm)

**Former President of USA, Bill Clinton addressing the Annual Meeting of the Clinton Global Initiative (Sep2009)** reiterates that 'women perform 66% of the world's work and produce 50% of the food, yet earn only 10% of the income and own 1% of the property. Whether the issue is improving education in the developing world, or fighting global climate change, or addressing nearly any other challenge we face, empowering women is a critical part of the equation'.

The Global Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum in 2009 ranked India 114<sup>th</sup> out of 134 countries for inequality between men and women in the economy, politics, health, and education. On equal economic opportunities and women's participation in the labour force, India ranked 127<sup>th</sup> and 122<sup>nd</sup> respectively. The number of women in the workforce varies greatly from state to state, 21% in Delhi; 23% in Punjab; 65% in Manipur; 71% in Chhattisgarh; 76% in Arunachal Pradesh. The diversity of women's economic opportunities between states is due to the cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity in each state. In rural India, women's economic opportunities remain restricted by social, cultural, and religious barriers.

Women's economic empowerment requires bold and sustainable actions to advance women's opportunities and rights and to ensure that women can participate and be heard.

To increase women's economic opportunities, women needs access to more and better jobs, a business climate that supports them in floating and carrying on business, a financial sector that gives them access to financial services tailored to their needs and greater livelihood security. This is especially true for women living in rural areas and vulnerable environments.

In the direction of economic empowerment of women, the Govt of India has initiated several programmes and implemented legislative policies. In an attempt, "The National Mission for Empowerment of Women" was launched on International Women's Day in 2010 with the aim to strengthen overall processes that promote all-round development of women. It has the mandate to strengthen the inter-sector convergence; facilitate the process of coordinating all the women's

welfare and socio-economic development programmes across ministries and departments. The Mission aims to provide a single window service for all programmes run by the Government for women under aegis of various Central Ministers.

In light with its mandate, the Mission has been named Mission Purna Shakthi, implying a vision for holistic empowerment of women.

The Mission focuses its interest on the following key areas which drive economic empowerment of women:

- Access to health, drinking water, sanitation and hygiene facilities for women
- Coverage of all girls especially those belonging to vulnerable groups in schools from primary to class 12
- Higher and Professional education for girls/women
- Skills development, Micro credit, Vocational training, Entrepreneurship, SHG development
- Gender sensitization and dissemination of information
- Preventing crime against women and fostering a safe environment for women

### **Schemes of Government of India for Economic Empowerment of Women**

As a tool for empowerment of women, the Government of India has brought out the following schemes with which it provides the required facilities to make them self reliant and financially viable.

- Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS)
- Public Distribution System for Food (PDS)
- Integrated Child Development Service Scheme (ICDSS)
- National Rural Health Mission (NRHM)
- National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM)
- Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)
- National Literacy Mission (NLM)
- Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (SABLA)

- Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY)
- The Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojna
- Total Sanitation Campaign

The recent study on economic empowerment of women in India reveals that women are visible in all spheres of economy and very interestingly, India has one of the highest percentage of professional women in the world, those who occupy managerial positions are under 3%.

### **Social Empowerment of Women**

Social status of women in India was pathetic in the olden days. They faced a hard days during post-Vedic and epic ages. Many a time they were treated as slaves. From early twenty century (national movement) their status has been changed slowly and gradually. After India got independence, the constitutional makers and national leaders strongly demand equal social position for women with men. Today we see the women occupied the respectable positions in all walks of the fields. Yet, they have not absolutely free from some discrimination and harassment in the society. A few numbers of women could become successful to establish their potentialities. Now the women in India enjoy a unique status of equality with the men as per Constitutional and Legal Provisions. But the Indian women have come a long way to achieve the present positions. First, gender inequality in India can be traced back to the historic periods. Secondly, in Indian society, a female was always dependent on male members of the family. Thirdly, a female was not allowed to speak with loud voice in the presence of her in-laws. Forth, as a widow her dependence on male members of the family still more increase. In toto, she had a very little and negligible share in economic, social and political life of the society.

After independence of India, drastic changes took place in social position of women. The Constitution of India has given predominant position and the national leaders also have recognised the equal social position of women with man. The Government of India has brought several Acts and suitable amendments to the prevailing Acts to regulate the welfare and security of women.

The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 has determined the age for marriage for avoiding and exploitation of child marriage provided for monogamy and guardianship of the mother and also permitted the dissolution of marriage under specific circumstances. Under the Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act, 1956, an unmarried women, widow or divorcee of sound mind can also take child in adoption. Similarly, the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 says that any person who gives, takes, or abets the giving or taking of dowry shall be punished with imprisonment, which may extend to six months or fine up to Rs.5000/ or with both. The Constitution of India guarantees equality of sexes and in fact grants special favours to women. These can be found in three articles of the constitution. Article 14 says that the government shall not deny to any person equality before law or equal protection of the law. Article 15 declares that government shall not discriminate against any citizen on the ground of sex. Article 15(3) makes a special provision enabling the state to make affirmative discriminations in favour of women. Article 42 directs the state to make provision for ensuring just and human conditions of work and maternity relief. Above all, the Constitution regards a fundamental duty on every citizen through Articles 15 (A), (E) to renounce the practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

For the social well being of women, the Government of India has ratified various International Conventions and Human Rights Instruments committing to ensure and secure equal rights to women. These are CEDAW (1993), the Mexico Plan of Action (1975), the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (1985), the Beijing Declaration as well as the platform for Action (1995) and other such instruments. The year of 2001 was observed as the year of women's empowerment. During the year, a landmark document has been adopted, 'The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women'. Besides, the government has adopted different schemes and programs i.e. the National Credit Fund for Women (1993), Food and Nutrition Board (FNB), Information and Mass Education (IMF) etc, to boost the social status of the women.

Non-government organisations have also actively involved in providing social security and justice to women. They have been striving to give a proper shape to the deprived and neglected dark side of the women's life. The Sammaan Foundation, Goonj Mission, Akshaya Trust, Smile



Foundation, Udaan Welfare Foundation, Pratham, LEPRAs Society, Deepalaya, Uday Foundation, HelpAge India the top ten NGOs working towards women's empowerment in India.

The various programmes of NGOs are:

**a.** Catalyze Rural Population, **b.** Build Models and Experiment, **c.** Supplement Government Efforts, **d.** Organizing Rural Poor, **e.** Educate the Rural People, **f.** Provide Training, **g.** Disseminate Information, **h.** Mobilize of Resources, **i.** Promote Rural Leadership, **j.** Represent the Rural People, **k.** Act as Innovators, **l.** Ensure People's Participation, **m.** Promote Appropriate Technology, **n.** Activate the Rural Delivery System,

### **Political Empowerment of Women**

During the independence movement, women were visible and active as nationalists, and as symbols of "Mother India". Gandhi, in particular, was instrumental in creating space for women through his non-violence mode of protest. Gandhi's legendary salt march initially excluded women, but due to demands from women nationalists he later realized the power of women organizers at the local level. His inclusion of women, however, was not located within a gender equality framework, but was a means to achieving a stronger and unified Indian state.

Political empowerment for women is regarded as a key driver for economic and social empowerment. The recent Constitutional amendments (73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments) brought about significant changes in the political scenario of the country with regard to women's participation in politics. However, in India, attempts to secure political representation in higher political arenas have not been successful. Fresh impetus is required with a modern approach. Indian democracy is 60 years old now, yet the participation of women in politics has actually declined since the days of the freedom movement, both in quantity and quality.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report released recently offers six-point action plan that includes a whole range of structural changes in the electoral politics to bridge the gender gap. It strongly pleads quota for women in Parliament. The action plan recommended by



the report includes constitutional reforms, changes in the pattern of electoral campaign and its financing, provision of reservation of seats, change in party selection rules, capacity building on policy and programs and gender sensitive rules in elected bodies.

The UNDP report, 'Gender Equality in Elected Office in Asia-Pacific: Six Actions to Expand Women's Empowerment', says that "globally, women hold slightly less than 20 per cent of seats in Parliament. In Asia-Pacific, just over 18 per cent of all members of national Parliaments are women."

"The leading countries in the region for women's membership in Parliament are New Zealand and Nepal, where women are one-third of all members of Parliament. Women are more than one-quarter of parliamentarians in Afghanistan, Australia, Laos, Timor-Leste and Vietnam," says the report.

India is far below these countries with 11 per cent women in the Lower House. "Despite frequent attempts to introduce a similar policy of reserved seats for the Lower House (Lok Sabha) of the national Parliament, these initiatives have repeatedly failed. With 60 women members of Parliament out of 545 (11 per cent), nationally, India's Lower House ranks only 105th worldwide," says the report. "Among the Asia-Pacific countries with the highest proportions of women in Parliament in 2010, most had constitutional, legal or party quotas. By contrast, among the 20 Asia-Pacific countries lagging behind in growth, none had implemented quotas," says the report.

### **Glimpses of the role Constitution, Government of India and State Governments in strengthening the political representation of women in India**

- The recent Constitutional amendments (**73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments**) brought about significant changes in the political scenario of the country with regard to women's participation in politics. With the advent of these Acts, India today has more number of district panchayats, block/taluk panchayats, village panchayats, municipal corporations, municipal councils, and nagar panchayats. All these bodies would jointly

elect nearly four million representatives and a considerable number of them would be women.

- **In 1976 the Committee on the Status of Women in India** was established and published a report recommending an increase in elected women at the grassroots level, which led to the introduction of the **33.3% reservation at the Panchayat level in 1988**. It was only in 1993 that an amendment in the constitution made the proposed reservation at the Panchayats (village level governing councils) a reality.
- Prior to the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments, only the State of Karnataka had reservation for women in institutions of local self-governance. The Janata Party Government in Karnataka in 1991 passed a Bill to implement 25 per cent reservation for women in local elections. This spurred a national debate on the issue of reservation for women in several other states.
- The representation of women in the Lok Sabha has basically remained stagnant. It reached a "high" of 8 % in 1984. This figure went up by a mere 0.2% in 2004. This despite the fact that all major national parties in recent years have declared through their manifestos that they would implement a 33% reservation for women in all legislatures.
- In its first ever gender gap study covering 58 nations, the World Economic Forum has ranked India a lowly 53. The report is based on United Nations Development Fund for Women's findings on global patterns of inequality between men and women.
- The Women's Reservation Bill (**WRB**) was first introduced as the **Constitution Amendment (81st) Bill** on 12th September 1996 by the **United Front government**, particularly after the effective implementation of the **73rd and 74th Constitutional**. The Bill envisaged that:
  - As nearly as may be **one-third of all seats in Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies** shall be **reserved for women**.

- Reservation shall apply in case of seats reserved for **Scheduled Castes (SCs)** and **Scheduled Tribes (STs)** as well.
  - Seats to be reserved in rotation will be **determined by draw of lots** in such a way that **a seat shall be reserved only once in three consecutive general elections.**
- **Article 243 D of the Constitution** provides that not less than one-third of the total number of seats in every Panchayat shall be reserved for women including Chairpersons in every Panchayats and such seat may be allotted by rotation to different Constituencies/ Panchayats at each level.

### **Conclusion:**

Women's empowerment is a key to open the doors of success in the economy. Women are facing great challenges at the family, community and state levels, ranging from poverty, illiteracy, and irreligious patriarchy to socio-political exclusion. The Government and Non-government organisations have to embark on a comprehensive plans and programmes for women focusing on enhancing their capacity building, participation in national activities, and increasing productivity. When women are empowered, they raise healthier, better educated families and financially viable and pave the ways to enter the main stream of development. "One motivation for women's empowerment is basic fairness and decency. Young women should have the exact opportunities that young man do to lead full and productive lives,.....the empowerment of women is smart economics".- *President Robert Zoellick, World Bank Spring Meetings, April, 2008*

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