

## WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA: SCHEMES AND STRATEGIES

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**Abstract:** In the history of human development, woman has been as important as man. In fact, the status, employment and work performed by women in society is the indicator of a nation's overall progress. Without participation of women in national activities, the social, economic or political progress of a country will be stagnated. The recent and rapid changes in women's roles and responsibilities shown that, if women are properly motivated to acquire the productive and useful skills, they can become a useful resource for national development. Women constitute 48.52 per cent (586.5 million) of the country's total population as per the census 2011. By virtue of these figures, they shall be considered as an important target group. Hence, it becomes pre-requisite to empower and build capacity of women economically and socially for promoting national development.

**Introduction:** Empowerment is the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Central to this process are actions which both build individual and collective assets, and improve the efficiency and fairness of the organizational and institutional context which govern the use of these assets. (worldbank.org) Empowerment was operationally defined as the process through which the marginalized women of SHG's obtain/seize the basic opportunities either directly through their own efforts or through the efforts of non-marginalized people in the society. Empowerment is not giving power but, bringing power out. Empowerment comes through improvement of conditions, standards, events and perspective of life for women.

**Women Empowerment:** In simple words it is basically the creation of an environment where women can make independent decisions on their personal development, as well as, shine as equals in society. Women want to be treated as equals so much so that if a woman rises to the top of her field it should be a common place occurrence that draws nothing more than a raised eyebrow at the gender. This can only happen if there is a channelized route for the empowerment of women.

Empowerment is a multi-faced, multi-dimensional and multi-layered concept. As such, it is not this or that, but is the action and interaction of various factors: physical, socioeconomic, political, mental, psychological, attitudinal and so on. Women's empowerment could be described as a process in which women gain greater share of control over resources, human and intellectual like knowledge, information, ideas, and financial resources like money and access to money and control over decision making in the home, community, society and nation, and to gain power. The term women's empowerment has come to be associated with women's struggle for social justice and equality.[1]

Borenstein noted that empowerment is best defined as an expansion of agency throughout women's lives, not in individual sectors. "We mean expansion of choice according to women's rules. It's not just that with increased choice you can choose to do something or have something, but you're also able to choose something that goes against the norm.[2] "Empowerment has come to denote women's increased control over their own lives, bodies, and environments." Women's empowerment emphasizes on their decision-making roles, economic self-reliance, and legal rights to equal treatment, inheritance and protection against all forms of discrimination, in addition to the elimination of barriers to access such resources as education and information.[3] To be empowered is to become aware of the magnificent potential that lies in each one of us but scarcely known to us. In the words of Swami Rama as quoted by Nuernberger, "By being aware of one's own potential and abilities, one can become a perfect citizen, help the nation and serve humanity." [4] The empowerment of the woman begins when she becomes aware of the socio-psychocultural injustice that is being done to her and also how gender inequality and inequity and gender and social-cultural, economic and political forces are affecting her adversely in every sphere of her life. It starts when she becomes fully aware of her positive self-image, self-esteem, positive rights and duties, of her capabilities and potentialities.[5]

Thus to empower women in the real sense is to enable them to flourish their talents, facilities, abilities and capacities, and to realize their full potentialities, and real identity as also freedom of thought, expression and action and strength to handle every sphere of their lives. It is not only to make them aware of their capacities, but also to provide them with the opportunities, facilities, and external and internal environment to utilize their inherent qualities and to develop in them self-confidence, self-esteem, social-psycho-economic self-reliance and self-dignity and the ability to raise a

voice and fight against injustice, exploitation and violence done to them.<sup>6</sup>

**Reasons for the Empowerment of women:** Today we have noticed different Acts and Schemes of the central government, as well as, state government to empower the women of India. But, in India women are discriminated and marginalized at every level of the society whether it is social, political and economic participation, access to education, and also reproductive healthcare. Women are found to be, by and large, dependent economically all over the India. A few women are engaged in services and other enterprises. So, they need economic power to stand on their own legs as compared to men. Other hand, it has been observed that women are found to be less literate than men. According to 2011 census, rate of literacy among men in India is found to be 82.14% whereas it is only 65.46% for women. Thus, increasing awareness about education among women is of very important in empowering them. It has also noticed that some of the women are too weak to work. They consume less food but work more. Therefore, from the health point of view, women folk who are weaker are to be made stronger. Another problem is that workplace harassment of women. There are so many cases of rape, kidnapping, dowry harassment, and so on. For these reasons, they require empowerment of all kinds in order to protect themselves and to secure their purity and dignity. To sum up, women empowerment cannot be possible unless women come with and help to self-empower themselves. There is a need to formulate reducing feminized poverty, promoting education of women, and prevention and elimination of violence against women.

**Historical Background of Women Empowerment in India:** The status of Women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millenium. In early Vedic period women enjoyed equal status with men. Rigved and Upanishads mention several names of women sages and seers notably Gargi and Maitrey. However, later the status of women began to deteriorate approximately from 500 B.C., the situation worsened with invasion of Mughals and later on by European invaders. Some reformatory movements by Guru Nanak, Jainism, Raja Ram Mohan Rai, Pandita Rama Bai and others did give some relief. It is not that Britishers didn't do anything for improving the condition of women. Some laws were enacted such an "Abolition of practice of Sati", Widow Remarriage Act 1856 etc. The real change came after independence. Constitution of India guarantees equality to women (Article 14). There are other articles too which ensure rights of women e.g. no discrimination by the state [Article 15 (1)] equality of opportunity (Article 16) etc. Feminist activism picked up momentum in India during later

1970's. Later on many groups and NGO's have been working for the Empowerment of women. We are proud that in India Women got voting right much before USA and some other European countries.

#### **Levels of Empowerment**

**1. Economic empowerment** is the means/process through which the women are provided with tools and opportunities through which they can transform the unfair power dynamics, as well as, economically succeed. It includes helping women

- to become power centers and get control over the family resources in view of their contributory role and income, to get economic independence,
- to become decisive partner in household purchases and spending,
- to get the freedom to spend their earning according to their own priorities, to learn about banking operations and credit management at individual level,
- to learn about the process of budget planning and forecasts,
- to become knowledgeable about labor and marketing and,
- sales management of production activities as well as the sale and purchase of assets, etc.

**2. Social empowerment** is the process through which the women are provided with the opportunities to overcome the problem of social discrimination in decision making process concerned to their social affairs. It engages in helping women

- to derive the required courage to move freely in the society without hesitation/support from male members,
- to derive the courage to live independent life in case of necessity,
- to interact freely without any social inhibition,
- to realize their importance for the well-being of the society,
- to become sensitized for their education,
- to stand up for the cause of their daughters/females in case of discrimination,
- to become more assertive against social evils, practices, problems and abuses,
- to break the social, cultural and religious barriers, to become active participants of rallies related to women issues,
- to become highly participative in the domestic, community and village related activities,
- to become more expressive in their opinions with regard to their domestic, community and village related activities,
- to come out of their religious dogmatic thinking about their status and,
- to come out of their thinking about men as only the earning member of the family, etc.

**3. Political empowerment** is the process through which the women are given opportunities to have access to power of resources, through which the women are provided with the opportunities to exercise legal power or authority to overcome obstacles in life or work environment. It deals with helping women

- to become aware of the political institutions,
- to become knowledgeable about the reservation of women in politics and functioning of political institutions,
- to have access to domestic support for political engagement,
- to lobby and get the support for gender sensitive/community development issues,
- to come out and campaign for candidates who are supportive for their cause in electioneering, etc.

**4. Legal Empowerment** is the means through which the women of SHG's are provided with the opportunities to exercise legal power or authority to overcome obstacles in life or work environment. It deals with helping women

- to become aware of legal rights guaranteed through constitution,
- to derive the required courage to take Legal Advocacy and Redressal System,
- to fight against domestic violence,
- to fight against dowry system and child labor and for equal wages, etc.

**5. Psychological empowerment** can be defined as the means/process through which the women become perceptive of the individual's competency in the light of group goals and objectives through internalization. It helps women

- to derive self-respect and realize their self-esteem/images,
- to open up their mental horizons,
- to be collectively aware about injustice happening to them,
- to become self-confident in addressing their personal issues,
- to become perceptive and intelligent in planning and execution of their activities,
- to improve their job/work competencies, work harmoniously with each other in order to inspire task commitment,
- to improve their negotiation skills, collective bargaining and team building skills,
- to become self-reliant for their needs and psychologically secure, improve their public communication skills, time management skills and conflict resolution skills, etc.

**6. Cultural empowerment** is the set of activities through which the women are provided with opportunities to realize the sense of pride pertaining

to their values, creative talent and cultural heritage. It includes helping women

- to interact freely with male members outside the family,
- to get the freedom in deciding the food menu at home,
- to break the social code of clothing,
- to derive the required freedom to participate in festivals and religious functions without hesitation,
- to perform freely family or religious functions and marriage ceremonies and,
- to attend pilgrim or religious places without any discrimination by the family and society, etc.

**Existing Problems of Women:** There are various issues and problems which Indian women generally face in the society. Some of the problems are mentioned and described below:

- Selective abortion and female infanticide
- Sexual harassment
- Dowry
- Disparity in education
- Domestic violence
- Girls have no property rights like boys
- Child Marriages
- Malnutrition
- Domestic violence and lower status in the family
- Status of widows considered as worthless in the Indian society.

**Steps taken by Government of India regarding women's safety:** There are various rules, regulations,

acts and laws made by the Indian government regarding the safety of women in India. However, a new act (Juvenile Justice Care and Protection of Children) Bill, 2015) has been passed by the Indian government by replacing the earlier one (Indian juvenile delinquency law of 2000) to reduce the juvenile age from 18 to 16 years especially in case of heinous offenses (after Nirbhaya case).

*Mother and Child Tracking System (MCTS), 2009:* This program helps to monitor the health care department to ensure that all mothers and children have access to all the required services and medical care, during pregnancy and delivery.

*Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojana Conditional Maternity Benefit plan (IGMSY-CMB), 2010:* This scheme sponsored by the Central Government for pregnant women age of 19 and above for their first two live births. This program provides money to help better health and nutrition of the pregnant women. The beneficiary gets 4000/- in 3 installments. *Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls – Sabla (RGSEAG), 2012:* This scheme targets adolescent girls of 11 to 18 for improving their health and nutrition. This program offers many services on central level to help women to become self-

supporting, to get nutritional supplementation, education, education of health, life skills and various types of vocational training.

*Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK)*, 1993: This scheme implemented by the Government of India with the purpose to provide the loan to poor women to begin small businesses.

*Priyadarshini*, 2011: It is a pilot programme for Women Empowerment. It offers women in seven districts, access to SHG's and promotion of livelihood opportunities.

*Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB)*, 1953: This scheme launched to promote social welfare activities and appliance welfare programmes for women and children through spontaneous organizations.

*Short Stay Home for Women and Girls (SSH)*, 1969: This scheme provides temporary residence to women and girls who are in social and moral danger due to family problems, mental strain, violence at home, social ostracism, exploitation and other causes.

*Swadhar*, 1995: This scheme makes women to be strong and independent by spirit, by thoughts and by action and provide full control over their lives rather than be the victim.

*Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA)*, 1982: This scheme is launched by the Government to improve the socio-economic status of the rural poor women.

*Support to Training and Employment Programme (STEP)*: The Ministry of Women and Child Development has launched this programme with the aim of developing skills of rural women and urban poor for self-employment. Funds are released to NGOs and not to the state governments.

*National Mission for Empowerment of Women (NMEW)*: The Indian Government has also launched this centrally sponsored scheme for comprehensive empowerment of women. The Mission contributes to empowering women socially, economically, eradicate crime and violence against women, to educate women, establishment of policies and programmes and spreading awareness.

*Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme*: This is a joint initiative of Ministry of Women and Child Development, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and Ministry of Human Resource Development to ensure survival, protection and empowerment of a girl child. *One Stop Centre Scheme*: This scheme provides support and assistance to women affected by violence, both in private and public spaces. In case girls under 18 years of age, are referred to the Centre, integrated with a women helpline to provide a range of services such as medical assistance, police assistance, psycho-social support/ counselling, legal aid/counselling, shelter and video conferencing facility.

*Women Helpline Scheme*: Provide toll free text message service to 181 helpline. Women in distress calling for help for shelter, legal aid/ court case management, psycho-social counseling, linkages with existing schemes and information about laws and schemes.

*UJJAWALA*: This schemes aims to prevent trafficking of women and children for commercial sexual exploitation through social mobilization and involvement of local communities, awareness generation program generate public discourse through workshops/seminars and such events and any other innovative activity by providing basic amenities/needs such as shelter, food, clothing, medical treatment including counseling, legal aid and guidance and vocational training.

*Working Women Hostel*: The objective of the scheme is to promote availability of safe and conveniently located accommodation for working women, with day care facility for their children, wherever possible, in urban, semi urban, or even rural areas where employment opportunity for women exist.

*Nari Shakti Puraskar*: This award would be conferred on eminent women and institutions rendering distinguished service to the cause of women especially belonging to the vulnerable and marginalized sections of the society. The Ministry of Women and Child Development would invite nominations from the State Governments, Union Territory Administrations, concerned Central Ministries, NGO's, Universities, Institutions, Private and Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs) working for empowerment of women.

*Mid Day Meal*: This scheme provides a post of bhojan-mata in every primary and secondary school who make the food available for school children.

*Kishori Shakti Yogana*: This scheme aims to improve the nutritional, health and development status of adolescent girls, promote awareness of health, hygiene, nutrition and family care, link them to opportunities for learning life skills, going back to school, help them gain a better understanding of their social environment and take initiatives to become productive members of the society.

**Conclusion:** Women too need to empower themselves by being strong from heart and think from mind. The way they face daily challenges of life, they should also face the social and family difficulties restricting their empowerment and advancement. They need to learn how to embrace their life with all challenges every day. Women must become literate, as education is beneficial for them as well as their families. Women can be empowered by creating a safe space, by supporting independence and mobility, teaching women how to read, increase savings and income, teaching job skills and seed businesses, building their self-esteem and confidence, boosting

their decision making power, impact health, building networks and creating public leaders. 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 discussion brings a major conclusion to light the status of women could be improved by women themselves and nobody else. It is the modern era of satellites, achievements and technology-based gadget. Why should women be left behind? 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 women in the total development effort of the country. The main stress should be on equal work and elimination of discrimination in employment. Women will have to empower themselves from below in order to compel the government to empower them from above. Among strategies for women empowerment, Government policies such as 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendment of Indian Constitution, Reservation policies, concessions, social legislation and enactment of certain acts were found to be very important. In this process various policies and programmes intended for empowerment of

women have been implemented for which special budget allocations are made in Five Year Plans. Besides, various schemes are being implemented to uplift socio-economic status of rural poor women and paving a path for their empowerment. However, the effect of such strategies failed to reach the target due to various bureaucratic and systemic failures. Further, there is a need for a change of values and behaviour in the society, a need for positive socio-cultural and economic empowerment and above all the will power and strong determination of women to join systems. Thus the government has been making sincere efforts to empower women in socio-economic and politico-cultural aspects, so that a welfare state and a prosperous nation can be built.

To truly understand what women empowerment is, there needs to be a sea change in the mindset of the people in the country. Not just the women themselves, but the men have to wake up to a world that is moving towards equality and equity. It is better that this is embraced earlier rather than later, for our own good. Swami Vivekananda once said "arise away and stop not until the goal is reached". Thus our country should thus be catapulted into the horizon of empowerment of women and revel in its glory. We have a long way to go, but we will get there someday. We shall overcome.

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