



RECENT TRENDS IN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT : AN ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The empowerment of the women is a highly significant issue of our times. There are so many saints and statesmen who have struggled for the empowerment of women in India. Several international conferences were organized to take stock of the situation and prepare grounds for the empowerment of women in all walks of human life. The empowerment of women is a multi-dimensional aspect which demands active participation of various stakeholders in a developing nation like India. Series of Constitutional protective and promotional measures are designed and implemented in India to achieve the goal of empowerment of women. In the present times women studies has become an important branch of academic mainstream in India. Recently series of innovative approaches are adopted to ensure equality of opportunity and empowerment of women in all respects. Gender justice is considered as a vital necessity in India. Educational empowerment includes training, orientation and academic progress of women. The physical empowerment of women includes food, nutrition, health, sanitation, life expectancy and growth. The social empowerment of women includes better status in the family, freedom for marriage, right to property, social mobility, social freedom, family welfare, social transformation and gender equity. The economic empowerment of women includes ownership and control of research right to property, employability, improvement in the standard of living, fulfilment of basic needs, entrepreneurship development and improvement of bargaining power of women. The legal empowerment of women includes constitutional protection, fundamental rights, protection against gender based discrimination, women specific laws, women courts and other safety measures. The political empowerment includes political reservation, political participation and political leadership development of women. The spiritual empowerment includes emancipation from superstitions, misbeliefs, customs, traditions and unhealthy practices that safeguard the interest of women. In the present times, state, civil society, universities, media institutions, social organizations, judicial organizations, non-government organizations and other institutions are called upon to work together to achieve the goal of empowerment of women in India. Series of intellectual, research and developmental initiatives are also developed with a view to empower women in all respects.

Introduction

Women empowerment has been an ongoing saga form many years. Historically we have seen that the role of a women have been conflicting. In India once they were worshipped as Sita or Durga and as time passed they are also subjected to social evils like Sati, Child marriage etc., Further women are even deprived of few basic facilities like food, nutrition, elementary freedom , freedom of education etc.,

Of late there have been a lot of onus given for enhancing the status of the women world over and a lot of schemes and Programmes are launched. Even the Millennium development Goals have included Gender equality and empowerment of women as one of its main goals. However on scrutiny six out of eight goals in a way involve women involvement and empowerment.

Empowerment literally means "To invest with Power". In the context of women's empowerment the term has come to denote women's increased control over their own lives, bodies and environment.

The UNO (2001: 04) has provided a meaningful conceptual framework of empowerment of women. It reads : "Empowerment is defined as the process by which women take control and ownership of their lives through expansion of their choices . It is the process of acquiring the ability to make strategic life choices in a contest where this ability has previously been denied".

The definition of empowerment of women most quoted by scholars is the one given by Batilwala (1998:01). It reads "Empowerment

is the process by which the powerless gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives. It includes both control over resources and over ideology. Ultimately it includes a growing intrinsic capability-greater self confidence and an inner transformation of one's consciousness that enables one to overcome external barriers".

Let us examine some the critical areas so as to understand women empowerment issues in the true context of the society.

Social Empowerment:

The tenth five year plan (2002-07) called for a 3 prolonged strategy of social empowerment, Economic empowerment and providing gender justice to create an enabling environment free of discrimination.

Social empowerment of women refers to Education for women, health of women, mobility of women, participation of women in various fields and also protection of women against Gender based violence.

Educational aspect

First let us examine the education aspect. Women Education plays a key role in the social development of the country. It is like a double edge sword. Educating a woman uplifts her life as well as the Quality of life of her family. It is a fact than any educated women would educate her children especially girl child and provide guidance to her children. An educated woman is independent and have progressive outlook which will easily be imbibed by her children. At the national level some of the issues like infant mor-

tality, blossoming population, morbidity etc., gets reduced if a woman is educated.

Few reasons quoted for the lack of educational opportunity for women / girl child

- the belief that there is no direct benefit from investing in girls education,
- Low /no benefit financially from investing in girls education and
- the cultural stereotyping that girls grow up to become a home maker.

However the concept in changing and these days we see girls outshining boys in board Exams and the opportunities for women are abundance. There are lot of Female CEO's like Kiran Mazandar of Biocon, Chanda Kochhar of ICICI etc., Also women have entered into direction of films in recent days(which have been predominantly done by male), become IPS and IAS officers, have been inducted into army, Air force etc., proving the fact that they too are capable to taking on the responsible role as a professional in the society.

In a survey done in India, Kerala showed the highest female literacy rate along with highest health levels denoting that literacy is linked health of the society and standard of living. Education enhances the awareness in women which in turn increases her confidence. Confident and well aware women would be able to tackle inequality and discrimination in a far better way than ill-equipped and illiterate women.

Health Aspect

Health aspect includes Food, nutrition, Sanitation, Life expectancy and growth of a girl child and women.

It is also observed that malnutrition is a frequent and direct underlying cause of death among women. Gender disparities even in nutrition is evident from infancy to adulthood. According to a survey done in Punjab women consume 1000 fewer calories / day than men. Malnutrition makes women susceptible to diseases and reduces their energy for undertaking tasks and poses risks on their reproductive health.

Hence it becomes evident that Health is the most important aspect of women empowerment. Health just does not mean physical health it also includes health as a holistic aspect wherein there is an expression of many roles they play as wives, mothers, health care providers in the family and in the changed scenario even as wage earners.

Some of the important factors that influences the health of a women are the reproductive health, malnutrition, awareness of available medical assistance, psychosocial factors etc.,

India is one of the few countries where male significantly outnumber female population and this imbalance has increased over a period of time. India's maternal mortality ratio (MMR) is highest in South Asia: 540 deaths per 100,000 live births or one woman dying roughly every five minutes. An estimated 1, 36,000 women die in India every year due to pregnancy related setbacks. The number of maternity -related deaths which occur in a week in India is equivalent to what occurs in a whole year in Europe.

Reproductive health is one of the major issue today firstly because most of the population control policies are enforced through women and secondly because of the increase in diseases like AIDS, SIT's etc., increasing number of adolescent pregnancies, the growing incidence of reproductive tract infections, maternal and child

mortality and morbidity highlight the urgent need for appropriate and effective interventions of sex related matters and access to reproductive health services and information.

An expert group meeting organised by UNFPA (United Nations Population fund) and office of the high commissioner for Human rights decided to apply Human rights to reproductive and Sexual Health of a women. It stated that "Reproductive rights embraces certain human rights that are already recognised in national law, International law and international human rights documents and other consensus documents. These rights rest on the recognition of the basic rights of all women to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of the children and to have the information and means to do so, and the right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health. It also includes the right to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence as expressed in human rights documents"(ICPD programme of Action, Para 7.3)

In India there has been a lot of schemes and projects launched . Sex education is being a part of the curriculum.

Though a lot of schemes and RCH Projects have been launched strong advocacy efforts are needed to translate the rhetoric into reality. A range of different constituency including Government , doners, NGO's, activists, Feminists and researchers must be informed and empowered to catalyse the process of empowerment of women in health sector. Also most importantly women themselves have to stand up for themselves and strive for their own health and well being by prioritising their health aspects. They have to realise that the until they prioritise their Health they cannot take care of the Health of their Family.

Political Empowerment:

It was only in 1929 that all the provincial legislatures gave women the right to vote on the same term as men. The Government of India Act, 1935 enabled all women over 21 years to exercise their franchise provided they fulfilled the conditions to play a significant role in less conventional political activities. However the founding father of Indian constitution were aware of the women requirement and Articles 14, 15, 325, 326 provided specific safeguards and promotional measures for the empowerment of women in Indian Society. The most significant landmark in the journey of empowerment is the historic 73rd and 74th Constitution amendment acts, 1992 by the centre and its ratification by the state. The Constitution Amendment acts reserved 1/3rd seats for women in the Panchayat raj and Municipal bodies.

In places like Mumbai though these reservations did help women to contest elections initially of late women are so active in politics that they did not require the reservations policies to win elections. However even though they have proved their ability to win elections and execute their positions effectively there are many hindrances for a women in achieving complete empowerment. One of the main hindrance at the village level is the lack of education and secondly the intervention and interference of male.

In a survey conducted in India it was found that some of the barriers for the women in carrying out their duties are

- lack of education (80%)
- Inadequate finances
- Lack of time for election activities due to household responsibilities

One of the alarming facts is that though there are a considerable number of women in the Gram panchayat it is found that seldom do the issues related to women like domestic violence and gender equality come into discussion. It is often seen that at many places women participating in political activities are biased either by

their husbands, father-in-laws or brothers and only general issues related to water, infrastructure etc., are being taken up and women tend to become a puppet in the political arena.

However the encouraging fact is that in India, the largest serving political party is led by a woman, the leader of the opposition is a woman, the youngest chief minister happens to be a woman which indicates that women are emerging on taking responsible positions in active politics in India.

Snehalatha Panda (2006) justifies: "women's participation in political processes is important for strengthening democracy and for their struggle against marginalization, trivialization and oppression. Emergence of women as a strong group would change the prevailing political practices, the nature and content of debates in the legislature and women's issues can be taken care of from feminist perspective both in policy formulation and implementation. The opposition to the bill characterized the patriarchal attitude of the male parliamentarians and crystallization of the caste and communalization of Indian politics. The long term consequences of the bill lay bare a reversal of the existing socio-political order which is most disconcerting for the opponents of the bill but such fear is unwarranted as long as the provision is limited to 33%. Both the ideological perspective of human rights and the necessity to widen the democratic space for practical reason demands inclusion of women".

Economical Empowerment

An International Centre for Research on Women publication made the case that 'economically empowering women is essential both to realise women's rights and to achieve broader development goals such as economic growth, poverty reduction, health, education and welfare'. According to its authors, 'a woman is economically empowered when she has both the ability to succeed and advance economically and the power to make and act on economic decisions' (Golla et al., 2011)

However economic empowerment cannot be seen primarily as an end in itself but rather a means to other developmental goals. Though economic empowerment seem to be an important route to poverty reduction, other aspects like inequalities in distribution of assets, access to education, land or capital, etc., also contribute.

In spite of many gender specific policies, historically established inequalities still persists and is testified in the form of continued gender inequalities which is evident by over-representation of working women in lower-paid, casual, part-time, irregular market activities. Phillips and Taylor (1980) drew on empirical evidence to suggest that definitions of skill in the workplace was often based on the identity of the person carrying out the jobs rather than on the technical demands of the job: women's work was typically designated as 'inferior', not because their labour was regarded as inferior but because they were regarded as inferior bearers of labour.

Most of the societies ascribe primary responsibility for unpaid work within the domestic domain to women and girls and the expectation on women in economic contribution varies considerably. Very few cultures or regions accept the contribution of women in sharing breadwinning responsibility but majority of the society expect women to specialize in unpaid and domestic labour. In some cultures even mobility of women in public domain itself is restricted and such hindrances contribute to the lower rates of female labour force participation. Also such restrictions contribute towards the ignorance of the available avenues and opportunities for the girls and women to assert their rights and freedom.

Many countries in the world have statutory laws which explicitly discriminate against women. In a review of data from 141 countries in the world, the World Bank/IFC (2011) found widespread evidence of legal differences between men and women which differentiated their incentives or capacity to engage in waged work or

to set up their own businesses. These restrictions ranged from the less frequently reported ones of needing husband's permission to start a business to the more frequently reported ones that differentiate access to, and control over, land and other property. Clearly, the attitude and behaviour on the part of the actors in the public arena further discriminates the women's capacity to take advantage of avenues available to be economically empowered.

Other than attitudinal and custom barriers there is nothing that requires girls to be given less education than boys. But the behaviour of the labour market where in job prospects are more to boys or men somewhere makes it understandable that parents invest more resources on their sons' health and education than their daughters' particularly among poorer households with severe constraints of resources.

However Women have been moving out of agriculture and into services and manufacturing - although at a different pace in different regions and generally more slowly than men.

Though women are slowly bargaining their way towards economic independence and decision making process by and large they remain responsible and retain responsibility for a great deal of unpaid domestic work like care of children, elderly and the sick, preparation of food etc., In rural areas in addition to the above they also get involved in collection of fuel, water, livestock care, homestead farming and so on. As a result, working women tend to work longer hours each day than working men, giving rise to the phenomenon of 'time poverty'.

The urban and rural women divide on economic empowerment also is a major concern. The urban women are most likely to be found in salaried forms of work and are entitled with maternity leave, child care support, better time saving infrastructure like electricity, running water etc., which in turn helps them to lead a better quality of life where as very poor and rural women with children have to manage their child care responsibilities in ways that can often have adverse consequences for themselves and their children. Also taking young children to work and most often leaving them in the care of older female siblings whose education thereby suffers or leaving them at home unattended are some of the concerns to be pondered about.

The following quote from the ILO (2008) sums up the issue of whether women should work. "While one should not assume that all women want to work, it is safe to say that women want to be given the same freedom as men to choose work if they want to; and if they choose to work, they should have the same chance of finding decent jobs as men. In other words, we assume that all women should have the freedom to work if they want to and their choice of work should not be determined by their gender.

It was also found that women who were economically independent reported more range of empowerment indicators than economically inactive women. In a study at Bangladesh it was pointed out that the mechanisms through which change took place by women being economically empowered in were not only material, but also cognitive, relational and behavioural. Hence economical independence also gives a psychological perspective to development.

Legal Empowerment

Some of the illegal things against women that prevails predominantly are Gender based violence, Rape, Molestation, Dowry deaths, Female infanticide, inheritance of property, child marriage etc., and many measures like

- prevention and punishment of sexual harassment at workplace, protection of workers in the organised and unorganised sector and strict enforcement of relevant laws such as Equal Remuneration Act and Minimum Wages Act will be undertaken,

- Recognition and authorisation of local and voluntary organisations to lodge complaints and facilitate registration, investigations and legal proceedings related to violence and atrocities against women
- Women's Cells in Police Stations, Women Police Stations Family Courts, Mahila Courts, Counselling Centers, Legal Aid Centers and Nyaya Panchayats
- Widespread dissemination of information on all aspects of legal rights, human rights and other entitlements of women, through specially designed legal literacy programmes and rights information programmes will be done.

The tragic truth is that the laws are rendered ineffective due to loopholes in the justice system and also the political influence on law enforcing authorities. Most of the convicts are not punished because of the money and power behind many unresolved cases.

Mere enactment of law cannot change human behaviour. There need to be awareness in the public about the availability of the law to help them.

Earlier due to stigma attached to the victims the reporting itself was done rarely. However of-late the critical support from the society, Ngo's and women organisation lot of victims are bringing out issues on Rape, sexual harassment etc., and trying to get justice against the crime.

Conclusion

Empowerment involves gaining a sense of knowledge, skill, and competence. To achieve this women and girls should be given opportunities to build and expand skills and resources by involving them in social and economic decision making process at all levels and imparting education. This developmental aspect brings in a social inclusion among women, as well contributes to the development of the Society by utilising the immense hidden and suppressed potential of the women.

In simple terms, it is apparent that in countries and companies that promote gender equality, progress is much more rapid and far-reaching.

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