

Empowerment of Women in Indian Society

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Abstract

A review of government's various programmes for women empowerment such as Swashakti, Swayamsidha, Streeshakti, Balika Samrudhi Yojana and another two thousand projects reveal that little has been done or achieved through these programmes. The discrepancy in the ideology and practice of the empowerment policy of women in India constitutes its continued social, economic and social backwardness. Women make up 49% of our country's population hence there can be no progress unless their needs and interests are fully met. Empowerment would not hold any meaning unless they are made strong, alert and aware of their equal status in the society. Policies should be framed to bring them into the mainstream of society. It is important to educate the women. The need of the hour is to improve female literacy as education holds the key to development. From the middle ages to the recent times, women have been colonized by various forms of patriarchal domination; her sphere of life has been bound by the protective and prohibitive walls raised by the moralists. With the passage of time, women's lives are radically transformed by developmental change due to modernization of social values. Women emancipation and women empowerment – have become the catchwords today but are these not just the illusions? Are the women of today really emancipated? Are they really empowered?

Introduction

The meaning for women empowerment is to give rights & power to women to come up in life to challenge against it. Empowering Women aims to inspire women with the courage to break free from social and cultural evils of the society. When and where women are given power they can perform their role effectively, everywhere. The women empowerment in India is a pre independence concept. Empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social or economic strength 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 of their own
- * Having access to information and resources for taking proper decision
- * Having a range of options from which you can make choices (not just yes/no, either/or.)
- * Ability to exercise assertiveness in collective decision making
- * 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-initiated
- * Increasing one's positive self-image and overcoming stigma.

Goals and Objectives

The goal of Empowerment of Women Policy is to bring about the advancement, development and empowerment of women. The Policy will be widely disseminated so as to encourage active participation of all stakeholders for achieving its goals. Specifically, the objectives of this Policy include

Empowerment is probably the totality of the following or similar capabilities:

- * Creating an environment through positive economic and social policies for full development of women to enable them to realize their full potential
- * The de-jure and de-facto enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedom by women on equal basis with men in all spheres - political, economic, social, cultural and civil
- * Equal access to participation and decision making of women in social, political and economic life of the nation and
- * Equal access to women to health care, quality education at all levels, career and vocational guidance, employment, equal remuneration, occupational health and safety, social security and public office etc.

Methodology

The present paper is based on secondary data like book, journal, net, internet etc. The diversity within women empowerment is now well established. The plural of women empowerment reflects both the contemporary diversity of motivation, method, and experience among women empowerment academics, and feminism's political commitment to diversity.

Empowerment of Women

Women constitute about 50 per cent of the population in India and 70 per cent population of women resides in the rural areas. Most of the rural women are engaged in the domestic and household activities. Even after 65 years independence, they have not been able to participate effectively in various occupations. The role differentials created by the culture in a specific society can be changed through educational development, change in social values and political will of the state. Some scholars evaluated the status and position of women in the society, especially in terms of political participation. Chafe (1972) finds that the discrimination against women is deeply rooted in the structure of society. Jahan (1987) points out that woman generally participate in large number in voting, but their participation is very low in the political activities. Kaushik (1989) states that the right to vote is the starting point in the struggle for women's political equality and their participation by way of voting has been growing but not steadily over the years. Mohanti (1995) reveals that it is necessary to create proper socioeconomic and political condition to enable women to participate effectively in the Panchayati Raj institutions without endangering the positive values of the prevailing family system.

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental Rights, Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles. The Constitution not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. Within the framework of a democratic polity, our laws, development policies, Plans and programmes have aimed at women's advancement in different spheres. From the Fifth Five Year Plan (1974-78) onwards has been a marked shift in the approach to women's issues from welfare to development. In recent years, the empowerment of

women has been recognized as the central issue in determining the status of women. The National Commission for Women was set up by an Act of Parliament in 1990 to safeguard the rights and legal entitlements of women. The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993) to the Constitution of India have provided for reservation of seats in the local bodies of Panchayats and Municipalities for women, laying a strong foundation for their participation in decision making at the local levels.

Education

Govt. of India has announced in their policy that Equal access to education for women and girls will be ensured. Special measures will be taken to eliminate discrimination, universalize education, eradicate illiteracy, create a gender-sensitive educational system, increase enrolment and retention rates of girls and improve the quality of education to facilitate life-long learning as well as development of occupation/vocation/technical skills by women.

Reducing the gender gap in secondary and higher education would be a focus area. Sectoral time targets in existing policies will be achieved, with a special focus on girls and women, particularly those belonging to weaker sections including the Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes/Other Backward Classes/ Minorities. Gender sensitive curricula would be developed at all levels of educational system in order to address sex stereotyping as one of the causes of gender discrimination.

Health

A holistic approach to women's health which includes both nutrition and health services will be adopted and special attention will be given to the needs of women and the girl at all stages of the life cycle. The reduction of infant mortality and maternal mortality, which are sensitive indicators of human development, is a priority concern. This policy reiterates the national demographic goals for Infant Mortality Rate (IMR), Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) set out in the National Population Policy 2000. Women should have access to comprehensive, affordable and quality health care. Measures will be adopted that take into account the reproductive rights of women to enable them to exercise informed choices, their vulnerability to sexual and health problems together with

endemic, infectious and communicable diseases such as malaria, TB, and water borne diseases as well as hypertension and cardiopulmonary diseases. The social, developmental and health consequences of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases will be tackled from a gender perspective. To effectively meet problems of infant and maternal mortality, and early marriage the availability of good and accurate data at micro level on deaths, birth and marriages is required.

The Constitution of India grants equality to women in various fields of life. While doing research in the field of rural leadership in Allahabad district of Uttar Pradesh we found that yet a large number of women are either ill equipped or not in a position to propel themselves out of their traditionally unsatisfactory socio-economic conditions. They are poor, uneducated and insufficiently trained. They are often absorbed in the struggle to sustain the family physically and emotionally and as a rule are discouraged from taking interest in affairs outside home. Oppression and atrocities on women are still rampant in Princely India areas of Allahabad State. Patriarchy continues to be embedded in the social system in many parts of India, denying a majority of women the choice to decide on how they live. The over-riding importance of community in a patriarchal sense ensures that women rarely have an independent say in community issues. Female infanticide continues to be common. Statistics show that there is still a very high preference for a male child in states like UP, MP, Rajasthan, Bihar, Punjab etc. The male to female ratio is very high in these states. Domestic violence is also widespread and is also associated with dowry. Leaving a meager number of urban and suburban women, Indian women are still crying for social justice.

Empowerment would become more relevant if women are educated, better informed and can take rational decisions. It is also necessary to sensitize the other sex towards women. It is important to usher in changes in societal 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. A woman needs to be physically healthy so that she is able to take challenges of equality. But it is sadly

lacking in a majority of women especially in the rural areas. They have unequal access to basic health resources and lack adequate counseling. The result is an increasing risk of unwanted and early pregnancies, HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases. The greatest challenge is to recognize the obstacles that stand in the way of their right to good health. To be useful to the family, community and the society, women must be provided with health care facilities.

Most of the women work in agricultural sector either as workers, in household farms or as waged workers in Allahabad district 40.4% agricultures labors are female. 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 labor in rural areas. There is also significant amount of unpaid or non-marketed labor 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 provided with proper wages and work at par with men so that their status can be elevated in society.

In recent years there have been explicit moves to increase women's political participation. The Women's reservation policy bill is however a very sad story as it is repeatedly being scuttled 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. Their decisions are often overruled by the government machinery. It is crucial to train and give real power to these women leaders so that they can catalyst change in their villages regarding women. awomen'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 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.

There is no doubt about the 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 emancipation 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.

We have to accept the fact that things are not going to change overnight but because of this we cannot stop taking action either. At this juncture the most important step is to initiate ground level actions however small it might seem. The ground level actions should be focused towards changing the social attitude and practices

prevalent in the society which are highly biased against women. This can be initiated by working with the women at the root level and focusing on increasing women's access and control over resources and increasing their control over decision making. Further working on the aspect of enhanced mobility and social interaction of women in the society would positively influence all round development and empowerment of women in India. One of the major aspects of women empowerment in India is to change the attitude of society towards women. The problem in India is that the society never worked on the premise of gender equality from a long-time.

Atrocities and discrimination against women is a way of daily life in Indian society. There is an attitude which still prevails in India where women are considered to be only worthwhile of household activities and managing the children. The veil system, child marriage and dowry are testimonies to this truth. Women have never been part of the mainstream society in India and they are still considered as a great liability. If we just look at the sex ratio it will show the plight of women in India. It is the lowest at around 933. Female literacy is just 54.16 % as per 2001 Census. In Indian parliament and assemblies women have never represented more than 10%. Most of the women workers in India are outside the organized sector. Administrators, managers, professionals combined together and technical workers on the other hand are the lowest at 2.3% and 20 % respectively. Now these figures give the real truth of the actual mentality of the society which has restricted women, marginalized women and discriminated against women quite openly. Can we achieve women empowerment in India with these alarming and dismal figures?

There are quite a large number of issues which need to be addressed to streamline the existing women empowerment programmes in India as well as initiating actual work at the ground level. Women make up to 48% of country's population but their living conditions are very tough and torturous. To initiate measurable actions at ground level, education of women should be given top priority and female literacy programmes need to be enforced across the country. Further to improve the socioeconomic conditions women need to be trained and better equipped for taking informed decisions. The real change will be only visible when social attitudes and

norms change. Here inclusive programmes involving the men are the need of the hour. This will be helpful for working out adjustments and sharing of gender based specific performance or tasks which are currently overburdening the women to no end. Unless we improve the ground level living standards of women in India we might not be able to influence their empowerment in any other possible way. Various issues that need to be addressed for improving overall conditions of the women in India include making access to affordable cooking fuel for rural women, providing safe drinking water, sanitation, increasing decision making capacity among women, providing equal wages as that of men, ending their exploitation, improving the political participation of women, eradicating poverty among women, increasing the security of women who are engaged in agriculture as daily wage workers, providing affordable healthcare and nutrition and managing the risk of unwanted pregnancies, HIV infections and sexually transmitted diseases.

When we talk about women empowerment in India the most important aspect that comes into the mind is the attitude of the society towards women. In fact the society has yet not accepted the feeling of the preamble of the constitution (Both men & women) the people of India. Women are still considered as burden and liabilities. They are also considered as properties. These kinds of attitudes give birth to the evil of violence against women. Women empowerment in India is not possible unless violence against women is eradicated from the society. National Commission of women was created in 1992 and Convention of elimination of all forms of discrimination against women was ratified in 1993. Apart from the laws and policy formulations the violence against women can be only tackled through attitudinal change that need to take place in the family, in the society and the female members of the society as well. Only this attitudinal change and proactive action against violence by every single individual will help in galvanizing the slumbering structures of the government and society towards further concrete steps and action. Unless society accepts gender equality as a fundamental principle of human existence all efforts will only partially bear results. Gender sensitization and gender training is primary need of the hour. The struggle of gender equality should be carried at every level and it should overcome the barriers of caste, class, race and religion. To reemphasize once again,

women's empowerment cannot take place unless women come together and decide to self-empower themselves. Self-empowerment should be all round in nature. Once this happens then we can think about galvanizing the system towards the direction of better health facilities, nutrition and educational facilities for women at a very large scale. Self-empowerment can begin by addressing day to day issues faced by individual women and tackling them with a mindset of improving the overall living conditions of women at every level and strata of the society. A movement has to be built which awakens the individual self in each and every woman for creative and generative action. In this regard progressive and resourceful women in the society need to come forward to help their less privileged sisters in as many ways as possible. This shall help us sow the seed for real women empowerment in India. This site envisions the rise of womanhood in true sense that is the rise of the "essence" of womanhood in the physical, mental, intellectual and the spiritual planes. It calls for the beginning of a campaign for the true rise of women in all spheres of life for the restoration of the balance in nature. Somewhere we have to make a beginning and it's always better if we make the initiation at our own self. We can strengthen this mass movement for the "rise of womanhood" by bringing about the necessary changes in our own life as felt by our inner self. Further we can transmit the new thinking to others who care to listen. A small step today will definitely lead to a giant leap tomorrow.

Conclusion

Empowerment for women in India requires a crosscutting approach and one which addresses the diversity of social structures that govern women's lives. There are numerous social movements fighting for the rights of the marginalized, such as the Dalit and Tribal. These movements have achieved many gains in assuring representation of the traditionally marginalized communities into main stream society. Women's rights within these movements are largely unarticulated and thus reinforce inequalities within the very structures from which they are demanding inclusion. Empowerment approaches for women therefore is not only about providing services, but also about recognizing their lived realities of multiple layers of the discrimination that hinder their access to services. The present study shows

that majority of women respondents do not have the affiliation with other political organizations and most of women representatives supported by their community people and spouse. It is also observed that majority of respondents never participated in any type of political activity. Feminism is a collection of movement and ideology aimed at defining, establishing, and defending equal rights-political, social and economic for women. Feminism seeks to establish equal opportunities for women in education and employment. There are various ethnically specific or multi-cultural forms of feminism. Feminist movements have resulted in the emergence of Pro-feminism and anti-feminism reactions. As far as India is concerned, despite the progress made by Indian feminist movement, women living in modern India still face many issues of discrimination. India's Patriarchal and culture has made the process of gaining land-ownership rights and access to education challenging. In the past two decades, there has also emerged a disturbing trend of sex-selective abortion. To Indian feminist's these are seen as injustices worth struggling against.

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