



## WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: MILESTONES AND CHALLENGES

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Empowerment is a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional and multi-layered concept. Women's empowerment is a process in which women gain greater share of control over resources - material, human and intellectual [ knowledge, information, ideas] and financial resources and control over decision-making in the home, community, society, nation and to gain power'. According to a Report of the Government of India, "Empowerment means moving from a position of enforced powerlessness to one of power". In this process, women should be empowered socially, economically, educationally and politically that can help them take Self decision regarding education, mobility, economic independency, political participation, public speaking and awareness to exercise rights. India has so far passed/amended several women specific legislations and implemented a plethora of programs and schemes for women's well-being and economic emancipation.

Empowerment is a process aimed at changing the nature and reaction of systemic forces which marginalize women and other disadvantaged sections in a given context. The need for women empowerment was felt in India long back. Mahatma Gandhi had announced at the Second Round Table Conference that his aim was to establish a political society in India in which there would be no distinction between people of high and low classes and in which women would enjoy the same rights as men and the teeming millions of India would be ensured dignity and justice- social, economic and political.

The country's concern in safeguarding the rights and privilege of women found its best expressions in the constitutions of India, covering fundamental rights and the directive principles of the state policy. Articles 14, 15, 15[3], 16, 39, 42, 51 [A] [e] contain various types of provisions for equal rights and opportunities for women and eliminate discrimination against women in different spheres of life. The Constitution [73 and 74 amendments] act 1992 provides that not less than one third [including the number of seats reserved for schedule caste and schedule tribe) of the total number of seats reserved for women. To make this de-jure equality into de-facto on, many policies and programs were put into action from time to time, besides enacting/enforcing special legislations, in favor of women. Apart from the constructional provisions, a large number of laws have been enacted to protect the Human Rights for women. The important policies which have vital implications for the women are National Policy for Empowerment of Women 2001 and



other relating to population, health, sanitation, water, housing, credit, science and technology and media etc. Since women empowerment is a global issue, UNO has also expressed concern in the matter. The charter of the United Nations declares equal dignity and worth of human person- all types of human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural. In 1993, the Vienna Declaration and program of action proclaimed the rights of women and girl child as "Inalienable, integral and indivisible part-priority objective of the International community". The National commission for Women made a number of recommendations for changes and removal of lacunae in 34 laws and 8 bills. It also made recommendations an Older Persons Maintenance, Care and Protection Bill, 2005. The Compulsory Registration of Marriage Bill, 2005, Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Rules 2005, laws relating to Rape/ Sexual Harassment assault etc.

### **DEVELOPMENT POLICIES FOR WOMEN**

Since the 1950s, when development planning first came on the international spotlight, a number of approaches, having different effects on women, have been tried. They are as follows:

1. **Welfare:** This was the earliest approach. It dominated from 1950 to 1970 and is still widely used. Its main purpose was to enable women to be better mothers influencing their role in the society.
2. **Equity:** This was the original approach of women in development and was utilized during the decade for women 1975-85. Women were seen as active participants in the development process.
3. **Anti-Poverty:** It aimed at increasing the productivity of poor women and saw their poverty as a problem of underdevelopment, not of subordination.
4. **Efficiency:** This is the most prevalent approach used today. Its aim is to ensure that development is efficient and effective.
5. **Empowerment:** An approach articulated by third World feminists since the mid-1980s. It aims at empowering women through greater self-reliance and sees women's oppression as stemming not only from male patriarchal attitudes but also from colonial and neo-colonial oppression.

### **LEGISLATIVE SUPPORT FOR WOMEN**

The Government has given greater focus to issues relating to women through creation of an independent Ministry of Women and Child Development, initiation of legislation that has taken the country closer to complete legal equality for women, gender budgeting and initiation of programs for greater inclusion of women in all walks of life.

The Government has so far passed/amended five women specific legislations viz. [i] The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956 [ii]The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 (28 of



1961) (Amended in 1986) (iii) The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986 [iv] The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987 (3 of 1988) [v] Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005- and 43-women related legislations. However, effectiveness of the laws can be seen/felt if women are political and social empowered.

1. The Government initiated the protection of women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, which has given more effective protection to women who are victims of violence of any kind occurring within a family and provided them a civil remedy to deal with such violence.
2. Distance Education Programme for Women's Empowerment 2000. Government had started a certificate course in the Distance Education mode on Women's Group Mobilization and Empowerment.
3. Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) 2000 was launched for one crore poorest of the poor families.
4. National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), 2005 was launched with a strong commitment to reduce maternal and infant mortality, provide universal access to public health services, prevent and control communicable and non-communicable diseases, ensure population stabilization, maintain gender balance and revitalize local health traditions.
5. Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY), 2005 is a safe motherhood intervention being implemented with the objective of reducing maternal and neo-natal mortality by promoting institutional delivery among the poor pregnant women.
6. Indira Sahara, 2000 was launched to provide Social Security cover extended to the age group 18-50.
7. Mukhya Mantri Antodaya Pusthaar Yojana, 2009 was launched to make the State malnutrition free, for Below Poverty Line (BPL) families.
8. Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK) was set up in March 1993, to extend credit facilities to poor and needy women in the informal sectors, has disbursed loans of Rs.11.69 crore during 1999-2000 (up to 31.1.2000) for the benefit of 0.47 lakh women.
9. The Government initiated the Hindu Succession Act, 1995 to make Hindu women's inheritance rights in coparcenary property equal to that of men.
10. Amendments initiated by the Government have been enacted prohibiting arrest of women after sunset and before sunrise, medical examination of persons accused of committing or attempting to commit rape and mandatory judicial inquiry in case of rape while in police custody.
11. The Government has introduced a bill in Parliament to amend the Factory Act, 1948 in order to provide flexibility in the employment of women at night while requiring



the employer to ensure measures for safety and protection and thereby generate employment opportunities for women.

#### **WOMEN'S RESERVATION:**

1. The new Act 2006 initiated by the Government has provided for reservation for women for the first time and wards have been reserved accordingly in the elections to cantonment boards.
2. Women's Reservation Bill 2010: Women's Reservation Bill or the Constitution (108th Amendment) Bill proposes to provide thirty-three per cent of all seats in the Lower house of Parliament of India and State legislative assemblies reserved for women. The Women's Reservation Bill has been a political raw nerve for nearly a decade now. Due to female feticides, infanticide and issues related to women's health, sex ratio in India is alarming at 1.06 males per female. It is expected this bill will change the society to give equal status to women.

#### **FINANCIAL FOCUS:**

1. The Government has introduced gender budgeting for improving the sensitivity of programs and schemes to women's welfare. The budgetary outlay for 100 per cent women specific programs has been rising every year and this year it is Rs. 11,460 crores.
2. Ensuring that at least 33 per cent of the beneficiaries of all Government schemes are women and girl children has been laid down as a key target in the 11th plan

#### **GIRL'S EDUCATION:**

2,180 residential Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya schools have been sanctioned and are providing elementary education to 1,82,000 out of school girls. Gaun Ki Beti, Kisor Balika Divas Yojana, Ladli Laksmi Yojana, Cycle Praday Yojana, are the programs run by the Government for empowering the girls in India.

#### **GENDER INEQUALITY:**

The principle of gender equality and protection of women right has been receiving attention from the days of independence. Accordingly, the concern of the country in safeguarding the rights and the privilege of women found its best expression in the constitution of India. While article 14 confers equal rights and opportunities on men and women in the political, economic and social activities without any discrimination on the grounds of sex, religion, race, caste etc. Article 15 (3) empowers the State to make affirmative discrimination in favor of women. Similarly, Article 16 provides an equality of opportunities in the matter of public appointments for all citizens, yet, another Article 39 mentions that the State shall direct its policy towards providing men and women equally, the right to means of livelihood and equal pay for equal work. Article 42 directs the State



to make provisions for ensuring just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief. Article 51 (A) (e) imposes a fundamental duty on every citizen to renounce the practices derogatory to the dignity of women. To make this de jure equality into a de facto one, special legislations have been enacted from time to time in support of women.

On 8 March 1996, on the occasion of International Women's Day, the parliament passed resolution to set up a Standing Committee for the "Improvement of the Status of Women" in India and the Committee on Empowerment of Women was constituted in April 1997. National Commission for Women [NCW] a statutory body set up in 1992, safeguards the rights and interests of women. It continues to pursue its mandated role and activities viz; safeguarding women's rights through investigations into the individual complaints of atrocities, sexual harassment of women at work place, conducting Parivarik/ Mahila Lok Adalats, legal awareness programs/ camps, review of both women specific and women related legislations, investigates into individual complaints, atrocities, harassment, denial of rights etc.

#### **MILESTONES AND CHALLENGES:**

##### **1. Convergence of service delivery at village levels:**

There are two main programs in the Department of Women and Child Development, which aim at convergence of services delivery at the village level, namely, Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) and Integrated Women's Empowerment Program (IWEP). The ICDS network through Anganwadi Centres reaches 85 per cent of the villages and hamlets in the country. The IWEP (erstwhile Indira Mahila Yojana) which extends to 650 Blocks operates through the self Help-Groups of women. Both these programs can be effective vehicles for the implementation of the National Population Policy. It is, therefore, critical that both the schemes are universalized.

##### **2. Nutrition:**

The Supplementary Nutrition provided under the ICDS Scheme is one of the most vital components under Basic Minimum Service Program aimed at eradication of the menace of malnutrition of children and women. The success of the program, however, depends largely on adequate provision of funds to the States and UTs. An Action plan needs to be drawn up for taking up nutrition in a mission mode to cover infants, adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating mothers the three critical links in the inter-generational cycle of malnutrition. One intervention that has successfully worked in improving nutrition levels as well as impacting favorably on retention of children in schools is the mid-day meal scheme. This has shown positive results in programs like TINP and needs to be replicated widely.

### **3. Formation of Self-Help-Groups:**

The formation of Self-Help-Groups as a basis for the social and economic empowerment of deprived and disadvantaged women has been found to be a successful mechanism for the organization, mobilization and self-development of women. This has been tested through the IWEP and Sawa Shakti projects of the Department of Women and Child Development and is being replicated in a number of programs of other Departments. These groups can facilitate the process of economic empowerment through thrift and savings, training and skill up gradation and access to credit and other productive resources. They can also be instruments of social empowerment through awareness generation and convergence of delivery of schemes. With the feeling of ownership and management of their own resources and savings, poor women have been able to choose their priorities and have even been found to cover the cost of additional nutrition and health gaps. The success of this approach has resulted in universalization of this mode of organization in all the southern States. There is a need to replicate this mode throughout the country.

### **4. Access to Resources:**

The issue of improved health and nutrition is intimately linked to access to and control over local, social, and economic structures. For women to be empowered we need to ensure: [a] equitable access and distribution of resources like land, credit etc. [b] access to education. [c] access to health /nutrition [d] access to water and sanitation. This implies that resources should flow into these areas to bridge the gender gap and that systems be developed to plan, implement and monitor the 'bridging' of the gap. Ownership of land tends to reduce fertility by providing an alternate means of security. Similarly, education has its own impact on reproductive behavior of both men and women. Improving the access of women/households in rural areas and urban slums to safe sources of drinking water will free them from the drudgery of fetching water and in decreasing the morbidity resulting from water will impact positively on the health and energy borne diseases such as diarrhea and cholera, The levels of women. [e] access to technologies which can reduce the drudgery of women on the virion works performed by them both within and outside the household is also a very useful intervention for empowering the women.

### **5. Women Component Plan:**

While the Planning Commission has already incorporated the concept of Women's Component Plan in Five Year Plans whereby 30 per cent of funds actually flow to women, it is important that guidelines are revisited to ensure their effectiveness.

### **6. Development of Gender Disaggregated Data System:**

One of the constraints in the preparation, implementation and monitoring of plans for the development of women is the absence of gender segregated data on various indices



of development at the State, district and sub district levels. These lacunae in our statistical system should be addressed on a priority basis.

**7. Legislation:**

Laws should be gender sensitive and ensure equal provision and access to resources for men and women. Also there needs to be a much broader focus on implementation issues. Many of the existing statutes such as Indecent Representation of Women's Act, Minimum Wages Act, Equal Remuneration Act, and Pre-natal Diagnostic Act, Maternity Benefit Act, etc., are implemented more in their violation. A number of these Acts are under review in order to strengthen their provisions. The Maternity Benefit Act needs to be strictly implemented and expanded to cover women in the informal sector, along with provision of paid leave for a longer period.

**8. Freedom from Violence:**

Women and girls face violence in various forms at various stages of their life cycle. This takes the form of female feticide and infanticide, rape, dowry death and more indirect forms such as desertion or abandonment of older women. This calls for a multipronged strategy of implementation of laws, awareness, community sanctions etc.

**9. Participation in Political Life:**

For empowerment, women need to have a voice in decision making and planning through adequate representation. Reservation of women in the rural and urban local bodies had enabled representation of nearly a million women at the grassroots who play a very important catalytic role in transforming the society. Similar representation in State Legislature and Parliament would further strengthen the process of empowerment of women.

**10. Sustained Media Campaign:**

One of the most effective interventions that can take place to address the issues of attitude and mind sets of men and women of the community and also of the functionaries of the government - the bureaucracy, police and judiciary is media campaigns. A sustained campaign through the print, electronic and folk media is necessary on various issues related to empowerment of women, health and nutrition, laws, value of the girl child, violence against women etc.

Non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations and self-help groups can be very effective in the process of empowerment through participatory communication. Participatory communication can help women to change their attitudes, behaviors and styles of communication. Empowerment is a complex term and may be measured in terms of women's freedom to shape their lives, their control over resources, their access to basic facilities, their level of political participation, their ability to take their



own decisions and their ability to remove hindrances in their path to progress. Self-help groups of women have been found to be very effective grassroots institutions in facilitating access for women to means of development be it information, financial and material resources or services. The 'self-help group' mode should be encouraged, so that the groups become dynamic change agents in bringing about empowerment and socio-economic development of women.

Organizing women into self-help groups marks the beginning of a major process of empowering women by strengthening their capacity for collective decision making and entrepreneurship development. Gender sensitization training has been developed to initiate the task of attitude change within male-dominated extension and research bureaucracies and donor agencies.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Indisputably, India is committed to the cause of empowerment of women. However, the journey towards progress is long and arduous. India has witnessed great change in the last two decades. Age old prejudices and gender-based biases are giving way to gender equality and harmonious development. Policies to raise women's age at marriage, enhance their educations and open greater employment opportunities will also help to empower them, at least in some respects. Our goal is to cause policy, institutional and individual change that will improve the lives of women and girls everywhere.