

# **WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES**

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*The article is a focal point of development agencies with respect to cohesive integralities and challenges with greater art of manifestation and glorification of ideas. A broad based attribute and political participation of women in the whole world is one of the significant parameters in the course and internal development of the global phenomenon.*

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT Report, 1990 said that “The real wealth of a nation is its people. And the purpose of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives. This simple but powerful truth is too often forgotten in the pursuit of material and financial wealth”. The moot question is in development syndrome—where is people and where is woman? Are women enjoying long, healthy and creative lives? If not, who is responsible? Women are called fair sex but always get unfair treatment. A woman’s life lies between pleasure at one end and threat of violence at the other. Middle class is the enemy of middle class and that of women. These are some hard questions need to be taken care of when we discuss women empowerment.

Women represent half the global population and one-third of the work force, they receive only one-tenth of the global income and less than one per cent of world property, and does two-thirds of all working hours. Still, day in and day out, our conscience is shocked by news of the violation of human rights of women.

Even in India despite their vast numerical strength, women occupy a marginalised position in society due to several socio-economic constraints. Social evils like dowry deaths, polygamy, child marriage, female infanticide, forced prostitution and crime against women have not been uprooted from our country. This has inhibited the effective participation of women in the political processes and institutional structures of democracy.

A broad-based political participation of women has been severely limited due to various traditional factors such as caste, religion, feudal

attitudes and family status. As a result, women have been left on the periphery of political life.

The increasing gender gap has tended to divide men and women into two different worlds, two separate planets, two unequal humanities. Today in high tech world women need freedom from—sexual exploitation, economic exploitation, rape, eve-teasing, etc. She needs greater freedom in choosing career to life partner and from bed to corridors of power.

The struggle to lift this curtain of unequal relationship and wipe out the unseen tear from the eyes of women is the most formidable challenge of our times. There are no easy answers, no quick-fix solutions to realise gender justice, which is the need of the hour.

It is found that due to New Economic Policy (NEP) and the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP), women have been marginalised not only economically but politically and socially too. The process of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation have accentuated gender issues and catapulted Indian women on a crossroads. They cannot afford to follow the life-style of Western women as their cultural and social ethos has been different since the beginning of history. Though the normative image of Indian women has undergone a sea change today due to multifarious factors, she is far from being identical with her Western counterpart in her role expectations.

The impact of these policies on women, particularly in India, has been in some respects positive also. The pattern of women's participation in decision-making processes at all levels and in every sphere of life has dramatically changed in India over the years. Undoubtedly, the welfare state in India is experiencing massive transformation in the era of new economic order which has a direct or indirect bearing on gender justice and empowering women.

Since ancient times women are facing problems. Their oppression is persistent and universal and its solutions are complicated. Many prophets of women's emancipation have come and gone, but discrimination against women and violation of human values still persists.

Gender issue is basically one that affects women directly or indirectly. In other words, any social evil perpetrated at the cost of women, any law or custom that reinforces and institutionalises women's inferior status in society, or any event or series of events that affects large number of women can be regarded as a gender issue. Gender issues are also those that galvanise large numbers of women into action, any such issues, which catch the attention of women's groups, and subsequently of the media.

There are a myriad other issues that are perennial, those that impinge on the life, health and work of women are women's issues. There exists

some ambiguity in interpreting the concept of gender, which is often confused with sex. While sex is biologically determined, gender is socially determined on the basis of social and cultural patterns of behaviour in particular historical and social circumstances. Socially determined gender patterns impute values to the roles performed by men and women manifesting in gender bias or hierarchy between sexes. Early socialisation lays down rules about and provides role models for sex-appropriate behaviour and actions. Most societies have pattern of socialisation, which encourage men and women to acquire differential attributes. Children are thus assigned a particular gender at birth and are indoctrinated to accept gender inequality as they grow.

Empowerment is not a technocratic goal—it is a wholesale political commitment. Achieving it requires a long-term process in which all cultural, social, political and economic norms undergo fundamental change. It also requires an entirely new way of thinking—in which the stereotyping of women and men no longer limits their choices, but gives way to a new philosophy that regards all people as essential agents of change that views development as a process of enlarging the choice of both sexes, just not one.

Gender equality still eludes women in India where still access to healthcare services and education is marginally restricted.

Empowerment means women must exercise full participation in decision-making process in all walks of life, and full participation with men in all walks of life, and fully participating with men in finding equitable and practical solutions to issues in family and in society. Apart from this empowerment includes women right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. Equal relationships between women and men in matters of sexual relations and reproduction including full respect for the integrity of the person, require mutual respect, consent and shared responsibility for sexual behaviour and its consequences.

The process of empowerment is multi-dimensional and it enables women to realise their full destiny and powers in all spheres of life. A woman's empowerment begins with consciousness—perceptions about herself and her rights, her capabilities and her potentials, awareness of how gender and socio-cultural and political forces affect her. Political empowerment, economic development and social upliftment of women are necessary and desirable to fight myriad forms of patriarchal domination, and discrimination at every stage. In fact, women's empowerment is central to the achievement of the triple goals of equality, development and social

justice. And for that political participation is needed. In a democratic system, women participation may be viewed at two levels: (i) awareness and assertion of women political rights; and (ii) acquisition and exercise of power.

Twentieth Century has brought a great change in the life of women all over world and 21<sup>st</sup> Century is the century of women. Woman's attitudes, values, inspirations, ways of feelings, standards of behaviour and acting for effective participation in all walks of life are becoming reality. Rays of hope are becoming brighter and radical changes in and through women's thrust in socio-economic and political process, will be instrumental to healthier, happier and progressive state in near future. As the largest vibrant democracy in the world, India has been continuously experimenting with a number of forms and modes of organisations and structures to achieve gender equality. Even then gender bias and discrimination at every stage show, what kind of society women have to live in. One can just think, the way the girls and boys grow up in their childhood. The reality of the Indian families is that "boys are brought up to be served, girls to serve. Boys are princes in the family, girls maids in the scullery".

In fact, women constantly suffer from discrimination in all fields of her life before and after coming on this earth. There is today clearly documented evidence to substantiate the claim that women are discriminated against and denied their fundamental right to survival, access to resources and control over their produce. Discrimination is a deadly disease. More women and girl children die each day from various forms due to gender-based discrimination and violence than from any other type of human rights abuse. Every year, according to the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), more than a million infant girls die because they are born female. Every year, because of discrimination, millions of women are mutilated, battered to death, burned alive, stripped of their legal rights, and bought and sold in an unacknowledged but international trade as slaves for domestic or sexual purposes. Because of their gender women are at risk of a range of violent abuses by private organisations and individuals.

In recent years there has been an alarming increase in cases of dowry deaths, sexual violence, and harassment of women, which reveals a large-scale societal breakdown. Women's position is worsening practically in every sphere, with the exception of some gains in education and employment for middle-class women. Women are still found in least paid jobs, long-working hours, and bearing full responsibility, for the home also by fetching fuel and water, by doing work in family production units, without being paid for labour, by bringing up children and looking after the sick and the aged. She does lots of thankless jobs silently.

This hour-to-hour and day-to-day contrast in the lives of men and women in our family and society, beginning from the childhood, creates a gender bias, which though familiar, is patently unjust. The manifestation of gender violence may differ in different socio-economic and cultural settings but its impact, intensity and consequences on women remain the same.

To understand the nature and forms of violence against women, one has to understand the function of violence as a maintenance mechanism of patriarchal society. The widespread gender violence is seen as both an indicator and means of perpetuating the low status of women, which also manifest itself through various not easily recognised forms of structural violence such as low health status, lack of access to higher education, employment, healthcare, etc.

In such a dismal scenario wherein women are generally powerless, direct violence against them appears to have the dual function of at once controlling women and perpetuating their subordinate status. And the physical violence aims at restricting women's physical mobility and to punish women who flout social norms in most societies. All the public places are physically dominated by men, which means it is very difficult for women to move, work or earn living. When women defy this norm, it operates against them and affects them severely, cutting across class barriers. To enable women to fight against discrimination, it is necessary to empower them by ensuring their participation in decision-making bodies at all levels. These views are being expressed all over the world by women regardless of colour, religion or group as they are united in their fight for equality, social justice and democratic rights. India has been continuously experimenting with a number of forms and modes of organisations and structures to achieve gender equality. No wonder, modernisation and Westernisation have not really spelt liberation for the average woman. Upliftment of women's status in India is today a searing issue that can only become a reality if suitable laws are passed and implemented strictly. Over the years, several laws have been amended and enacted for improving women's status and securing their basic rights.

However, laws still exist that bluntly contradict all principles of gender justice and require change. The example that comes immediately to mind is the personal laws of different communities where several discriminatory provisions have been allowed to continue on one pretext or the other. Gender equality can be achieved if the law takes into consideration the special circumstances of women's life in which they are denied access to education, economic independence, etc.

Women's problems will be solved by women themselves. One primary goal of gender justice is the creation of a just, democratic and equal society.

And for that women's empowerment is necessary and desirable. Here empowerment means that women need to be taken seriously. Equally important is enlightenment of men, change their attitudes towards women and understand their problem.

Liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation have most adversely affected women collectively as well as individually, irrespective of their class, creed, economic status or their education level. It has most critically constructed the image of a "neo-women"—a precarious transition in even the thought process of women of this generation. It has, in fact strengthened the set roles of women in the socio-economic cultural sphere from which she has to be freed to be accepted and treated as a human being. In fact women have already paid the heavy price due to LPG and SAP. Women are in double jeopardy. Discriminated against as women, they are also as like men, if not more so, to become victims of human rights violations. Despite moves to introduce equality for women on the legislative and political front, discrimination on grounds of gender remains an international reality. Parliamentary Union Survey of 96 national parliaments, published in 1991, found that just 11 per cent of their numbers were women. While women are under-represented in national and international decision-making structures, they are over-represented among the victims of rights abuse.

The only and most appropriate way to solve the problems of women is to change the position of the women in society and make her equally responsible for the well-being of the social order. This can be only achieved by empowering the women. Of late, steps have been taken to improve women's representation and the policy of reservation for women has been incorporated in the 73rd and 74th Amendments. Reservation of seats for women in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and municipal bodies will provide them with an opportunity to ventilate their grievances and to take active part in the formal political arena which deals with social and economic problems.

But in the recent years, special efforts are being made to ensure women's representation in the PRIs in the wake of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act which reserves one-third of the seats for women in PRIs. The participation of women in PRIs is considered essential not only for ensuring their political participation in the democratic process but also for realising the developmental goals for women. Bihar has taken the lead in this regard where women got 50 per cent representation in PRIs. And elected women are visible and doing well. Other states in Indian federal system may follow the same as Bihar did for empowering women. Subsequently, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh also gave same percentage of reservation in PRIs. These have positive impact on the empowerment of the women.

For women participation has three roles: educative, integrative and empowering. Women constitute half the society and belong to all classes and all sections. So, the women's empowerment is not the question of one section only. It is ultimately the question of the entire society. It is an integral part of the entire social phenomenon. Human society cannot move forward without stirring half of its body, the women. Thus, it is in the social and national interest to draw womenfolk into the social and political mainstream. Today women are connected directly or indirectly to the operation of society at every level, and at the same time occupy the aggregate position of outsiders. No one can deny today the fact that for women's empowerment, participation at every level and in every field is essential.

Although women are participating in ever greater numbers in politics and public life all over the world, they still remain largely outside the realms of power and decision-making in government. The gaps between men and women's participation in political life have narrowed somewhat but remain huge, as figures on women as head of governments, holders of ministerial positions and Member of Parliament show. When significant number of women in politics, as in the Nordic countries where women hold a relatively high percentage of elective positions in government, studies show that they do make a difference. As Dahlerup says:.. women politicians are just as powerless when it comes to the global economic changes as are the male politicians. But many women in politics in the Scandinavian countries have to some extent changed people's attitude towards women as leaders, have changed the political discourse somewhat, have placed women's issues on the agenda, and have to some extent changed the political culture. It is argued that if women in good number enter the corridors of power they will be able to take up women's issues within state structures and also effect changes in the party and local bodies. They will have access to state resources which can support women's groups and provide services to them. Their positions and actions can legitimise the women's cause in the eyes of the people and parties. Independence of India opened the doors for the women of the country to find their due place in society and partake in the political, social and administrative life of the country. The advent of democracy in India brought forth the spectacle of women moving up along in the corridors of political power, which has brought them new opportunities both as voter and candidates. They entered the two houses of the Indian Parliament in their own way and some of them made a mark therein. The committee on the status of women has attributed this to the lack of interest shown by political parties in improving the political knowledge of women. It is generally held that in spite of the growing

equality between men and women in society, political participation is taken as more natural to men than to women. It is assumed that women voters vote as the male members of the family desire and as such no separate and special effort is usually made to mobilise them as participants in the voting act. Women are increasingly participating in the political process, as indicated by the shrinking percentage gap of actual voters by sex. In 1962 the gap was more than 15 per cent. This declined steadily over different elections. In 1980, the gap was little over six per cent, but in 1984, it again went up to about 10 per cent. The number of women contestants to the Lok Sabha rose steadily between 1962 and 1980, but number of successful female candidates progressively declined till 1997 (from 33 in 1962 to 19 in 1977). But in elections of 1980 and 1984 the number of successful female candidates again increased to 28 in 1980 and 42 in 1984. However, women members now constitute less than 10 per cent in the Lok Sabha. The picture is no better in the states. These increasing figures are indicative of the fact that after Independence more and more political consciousness and desire for greater political clout has grown among Indian women. However, this increasing participation of women is insignificant when we view this fact in the light of male participation. An expert group meeting on Equality in Political Participation and Decision-making organised by DAW made the following recommendations to women's status in political parties:

- as an interim measure, substantial targets, such as quotas or similar forms of positive action to ensure;
- women's candidacy for office and participation in political posts should be applied;
- training programmes should be developed to increase the political and management skills of women in politics, both as candidates and as elected or appointed officials, especially making use of the experience of other women who have achieved public office;
- women's sections of parties should be evaluated and strengthened to enable them to influence party policy and promote female candidacy;
- information on potential women candidates should be compiled, maintained on a systematic basis and made available when candidacy or appointments are considered;
- parties should be encouraged to examine the criteria used to select persons for political functions to ensure that the varieties of experience possessed by women are taken into account in selection;
- training activities should be developed to sensitise party members to the needs and potentials of female members;



- as an interim measure where the electoral system might make it useful, parties should undertake special measures to provide funding for women candidates for office.

Other important mechanisms include networking, participation in the campaigns of other politicians, lobbying, membership in the same clubs, professional and academic associations.

The corrective mechanisms are to be viewed holistically and not as isolated piecemeal actions. Only then the women will be at par with men in all fields.

#### SUMMING UP

Manu's dictum that she should do nothing independently even in her own house. In childhood subject to her father, in youth to her husband, and when her husband is dead, to her sons, she should never enjoy independence—have proved wrong. Now women have come out of their isolation, got themselves educated, stormed male bastions in jobs and services and also have the backing of constitutional safeguards and social legislation.

Women need to make themselves politically visible and politically important in order to change the direction of development, empowerment and gender justice. Unless deep-rooted changes in power relations between people and between men and women are brought about things are not going to change. Rays of hope are becoming brighter and radical changes in and through participation in social political process, will be instrumental to women' empowerment. Women's empowerment is essential and desirable for societal development. A society attempting to develop without the full participation of women is like bird trying to fly with only one wing. It is bound to go off course. Let women realise their immense potentialities for, social change, rise up and excel men as the nation builders. At the same time women must take upon themselves the task of participating in political and economic affairs with commitment and a sense of challenge and men must accept women in their new roles.

One may conclude by saying that women in India have to go a long way to attain the empowerment in political, economic, social and cultural field. The need of the hour are: not welfare, but development; not charity, but entitlement; not assistance, but empowerment; not structural adjustment, but structural change; not even social security but social and gender justice, if the women are to survive and flourish in the given situation.