

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Despite various measures undertaken by the government after Independence and as well during the British rule, the Women haven't been fully empowered. We may be proud of a handful of women in India occupying highest offices of President, Lok Sabha Speaker, Leader of the Opposition or women like Ms. Indra Nooyi, CEO of PepsiCo but as a matter of fact there are still a large number of women suffering from dowry deaths, domestic violence and exploitation. The atrocities on girls start even before they are born as we can see the killing of girl child in the womb long before they are born. Some states sex ratio is pathetic and has reached down to 877 females per 1000 males. These are the some states where female feticide is prevalent. The female literacy rate is also lower than the male literacy rate. The ground reality is deprivation, degradation and exploitation of women and to a larger extent women from rural areas and those belonging to deprived sectors of the society. The government as well as non-government organization should strive hard to bring some positive change in the women who indeed really need the help, the downtrodden section of our society. This paper tries to analyze the meaning of empowerment and need for women empowerment at this current time in our society.

KEYWORDS: Women, Empowerment, Women Empowerment, Non-Government Organization, Decision Making.

INTRODUCTION

“Progress of our land cannot be achieved without the active participation of our Mothers, Sisters and Daughters”

Dr. S.
Radhakrishnan

The status of Women in India has been subject to many drastic changes over the past several millenniums. Even today we find maximum of our deities are feminine like

Goddess Durga, Goddess Kali, Goddess Laxmi, to name a few. It is clear from the fact that maximum of our deities were Goddesses which makes it clear that how respected were the women in our society since times immemorial. Looking into the early Vedic period Women enjoyed equal status with men. Rigveda & Upnishads mention several names of women sages and seers notably Ghosa, Lopamudra, Sulabha, Maitrey & Gargi. They were free to study the Vedas also. However as the time passed by the status of women started deteriorating approximately from 500 B.C., and the situation still worsened with coming of foreign rulers like Mughals and later on by European invaders.

Social reformers like Gautam Buddha, Mahavir Jain, Guru Nanak, and later efforts of Ishwarchandra Vidya Sagar, Rajaram Mohan Rai, Pandita Rama Bai and others did give some relief to the deteriorating status of women in India. Some British officials like William Bentinct also took harsh steps to improve the condition of women. Some laws were enacted such as ‘Abolition of practice of Sati (1829)’, ‘Widow Remarriage Act (1856)’, ‘the Child Restriction Act, (1929)’, ‘Women Property Right Act (1937)’ etc. The real change in the status of women came only after independence. Constitution of India guarantees equality to women (Article 14), no discrimination by the state [article 15(1)], equality of opportunity (Article16), prohibition of traffic in human beings and forced labour (Article 23) etc. The directives Principles of State Policy contained in Part IV of the constitution provides to secure equal pay for equal work of men as well as women. Part IX of the constitution envisages a three-tier system of panchayats and which provides 1/3 seats reserved for women. Feminist activism picked up momentum in India during later 1970’s. Since then many groups and NGO’s have been working for the Empowerment of women. As a matter of fact Indian Women got voting rights much before USA and some other European countries.

Women constitute almost 50% India’s population but as far as their social status is concerned, they are not treated as equal to men at all places. The better half in the Western countries enjoys equal rights and status with men in all walks of life. But discriminations and gender disabilities are present in some form of the other in India even today. The ironical situation is such that she was sometimes concerned as Goddess and at other times merely as slave.

MEANING OF EMPOWERMENT

It is evident from the history that a lot is to be done to empower women to make them equal footing with their male counterparts. Let us first understand what empowerment is. The term ‘empower’ literally refers to the power or authority given to a person to have independent control over his/her own life or the situation he/she lives in Elliott *et al. Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press (2001). The World Bank’s *Empowerment and Poverty Reduction: A Sourcebook* defines empowerment in its broadest sense as the ‘expansion of freedom of choice and action.’ Empowerment is a process that enlightens the people to go towards their destinations and improve their status. Particularly, empowerment liberates the people both mentally and physically. It enables people to understand the reality of their environment and shape that environment if needed. Empowerment is a process in which both men and women attain self-reliance to overcome all situations in life. It ensures self-confidence, skill development, facing and solving problems and making right decisions. Empowerment is not essentially political alone; it is a process having individual, economic, social and political dimensions with personal empowerment being the core of the empowerment process. Political and social empowerment can only be achieved by ensuring economic empowerment first. This is not only a social or a political problem but also a personal problem. Perhaps Empowerment is not merely a process but an outcome. Empowerment is a process that enlightens the people to attain their aim and improve their status. It is a process of changing the existing power relations in favour of the poor and the marginalized women.

Kabeer, (2000) defines empowerment as ‘the expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them.’ Thus woman empowerment signifies a process of change and women themselves must become agents of that change if empowerment has to take place. The crux of the definitions has been on grassroots participatory methods and of their empowerment potential for the poorest of the poor (especially women).

NEED FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

"May all the people be happy, may all the people be healthy. May all see only the good things and nobody should be unhappy. "

- The Old Vedantic saying

Batliwala, S. (1994), believe that the term empowerment especially with reference to women has become popular in the development field since 1980s, and states that the concept of women's empowerment is the outcome of important critiques generated by the women's movement, particularly by 'third world' feminists. They clearly state that women's empowerment requires the challenging of patriarchal power relations that result in women having less control over material assets and intellectual resources. The empowerment process starts from within but access to new ideas and information will come from external agents. With new consciousness and the strength of solidarity, women can assert their right to control resources and to participate equally in decision making. Ultimately, women's empowerment must become a force that is an organised mass movement, which challenges and transforms existing power relations in society. Women represent 50 per cent of the world's population, produce half the world's food supply, account for 60 per cent of the working force, contribute upto 33.3 per cent of the official labour force, perform nearly 66.6 per cent of all working hours, receive 10 per cent of world economy but, surprisingly own less than one per cent of world's real estate. This fact is more than enough to cater for the need for Women Empowerment which shall be achieved only through providing basic civic amenities, right to take decision, opportunities, education, equal wages; right to question, fight against violence and injustice, and express their views to the society at large. Hence, this is high time that the status of women be improved by well-conceived, planned development programmes which would have active community participation. Empowerment in women should start from within her; it cannot be enforced by outer source. Women should exercise their rights to speak out on their own behalf. However, institutions such as Government Agencies and Non-Government Organizations could provide support by helping them to improve self-confidence, develop their self-reliance, and help them to set their own agendas. An empowered woman has a positive self-image. She is active and confident in taking part in decision making related to herself and her family. She is conscious about herself and her rights and possesses knowledge of herself. She helps in the empowerment of children regardless of the sex. An empowered woman has a greater

access to knowledge and the resources. She has enhanced autonomy in decision-making. She has a greater ability to plan life. She has better control over circumstances that influence life and the ability to overcome the restrictions and constraints imposed by customs, beliefs and practices. Empowered women psychologically do not consider herself inferior to anyone. Women, being the highest in population strength, play a vital role in the development of the family, the community and nation, to such an extent, without them, there is no transformation or economic development in any society. Since independence, especially for the empowerment of women many government schemes have been introduced, which paves the way for notable social changes. When a woman attains such independence she writes the destiny of herself, her family and the society as a whole. Economic empowerment is a necessary condition for enabling women to seek justice and equality. It is, therefore, necessary to seek participation of women as equal partners with men in all fields of work, equal access to all positions of employment, equal opportunities for work related training and full protection of women at work place. According to Agarwal, Deepti (2001), “Women need to be viewed not as beneficiaries but as active participants in the progress of development and change empowerment of women could be organized into groups for community participation as well as for assertion of their rights in various, services related to their economic and social wellbeing.” Forming small Self-Help Groups to become economically strong can also bring a great change in their life.

Karl (1995) studied the role of SHG of women on decision-making and concluded empowerment as a multifaceted process, involving the pooling of resources to achieve collective strength and countervailing power and entailing and the improvement of manual and technical skills, administrative, managerial and planning capacities and analytical reflective abilities of local women. Money spent in the hands of men is quite different from money in the hands of women. An International Labour Organization study finds that men tend to spend 60 per cent of their income in their home and 40 per cent on themselves, whereas a woman spends only 10 per cent on herself. Thus when a woman handles the household income the family gets more benefits. The World Bank studies have shown that the enhancement of women’s earnings would have much profound effect on the welfare of the family as a whole since the increase in women’s

income results in direct contribution to better education, health and nutrition for children. It is implied that the economic independence not only improves the status of women but also the condition of the society in general.

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