

# WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA: ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES OF 21ST CENTURY

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## ABSTRACT

Women Empowerment has been an issue of immense discussions and contemplation over the last few decades world-wide. This as an agenda has been on top of the lists of most government plans & programs as well. Efforts have been made on a regular basis across nations to address this issue and enhance the socio-economic status of women.

Women empowerment in India is a topic that has gained a lot of attention and importance in recent years. It refers to the process of enhancing the status, rights, and opportunities of women in various spheres of life, such as education, health, economy, politics, and society. Women empowerment in India is essential for achieving gender equality, social justice, human development, and sustainable growth.

Today the empowerment of women has become one of the most important concerns of 21st century. But practically women empowerment is still an illusion of reality. We observe in our day to day life how women become victimized by various social evils. Women Empowerment is the vital instrument to expand women's ability to have resources and to make strategic life choices.

Empowerment of women is essentially the process of upliftment of education, economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. It involves the building up of a society wherein in women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being a woman in a traditionally male dominated structure.

The present sequel, has been focused on status, role, situation, authority and problems with the role of women empowerment of India. The various step forwardness have been taken as a part of enhancement to make Indian women successful in their respective field of work.

**Keywords:** Empowerment, Women Empowerment, Strategies of Empowering, Policy implications, Government enactments.

**INTRODUCTION:**

Women are the backbone of society. Society never complete without women. Men and women are the two wheels of life. There should be uniformity in both parties. It has observed that the structure of Indian society, always gives the secondary status to the women. As per the development of education, the changes have been taking place in the position of women.

In the history of human development, woman has been as important as man. In fact, the status, employment and work performed by women in society is the indicator of a nation's overall progress. Without the participation of women in national activities, the social, economical or political progress of a country will be stagnated.

In the Indian constitution, the principle of gender equality is enshrined with preamble, fundamental rights, fundamental duties and directive principles. The Constitution not only grants equality towomen, but also empowers the state to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. Empowerment is the one of the key factors in determining the success of development is the status and position of women in the society.

For the healthy development of society there is a need to special focus on social, economical and political overall development of women. We need to augment our efforts for empowering women and enhance their progress. It is our moral, social and constitutional responsibility to ensure their progress by providing them with equal rights and opportunities.

**EMPOWERMENT: CONCEPT AND ITS MEANING:**

Empowerment can be viewed as means of creating a social environment in which one can make decisions and make choices either individually or collectively for social transformation. It strengthens the innate ability by way of acquiring knowledge, power and experience (Hashemi Schuler and Riley, 1996).

Empowerment is the process of enabling or authorizing individual to think, take action and control work in an autonomous way. It is the process by which one can gain control over one's destiny and the circumstances of ones lives. Empowerment includes control over resources (physical, human, intellectual and financial) and over ideology (beliefs, values and attitudes). (Baltiwala, 1994). It is not merely a feel of greater extrinsic control, but also grows intrinsic capacity, greater self-confidence and an internal transformation of one's consciousness that enables one to overcome external barriers to accessing resources or changing traditional ideology (Pinto, 2001).

Women's empowerment is very essential for the development of society. Empowerment means individuals acquiring the power to think and act freely, exercises choice and fulfill their potential as full and equal members of society.

As per the United National Development Fund for women (UNIFEM), the term women's empowerment means:

- Acquiring knowledge and understanding of gender relations and the ways in which these relations may be changed.
- Developing a sense of self-worth, a belief in one's ability to secure desired changes and the right to control one's life.

- Gaining the ability to generate choices exercise bargaining power.
- Developing the ability to organize and influence the direction of social change, to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally.

Batliwala (1974) defines empowerment as “the process of challenging existing power relation and of gaining greater control over the source of power”. Women’s empowerment is seen as the process and the result of the process of:

- Challenging the ideology of male domination and women’s subordinations.
- Enabling women to gain equal access to and control over the resources (material, human and intellectual).

Thus, empowerment means a psychological sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power and legal rights. It is a multi-level construct referring to individuals, organizations and community. It is an international, ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to the control over these resources.

#### **DIMENSIONS AND PARAMETERS OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT:**

The process of empowerment has five dimensions, viz. Cognitive, psychological, economic, political and physical:

- (i) The cognitive dimension refers to women having an understanding of the conditions and causes of their subordination at the micro and macro levels. It involves making choices that may go against cultural expectations and norms;
- (ii) The psychological dimension includes the belief that women can act at personal and societal levels to improve their individual realities and the society in which they live;
- (iii) The economic component requires that women have access to, and control over, productive resources, thus ensuring some degree of financial autonomy. However she notes that changes in the economic balance of power do not necessarily alter traditional gender roles or norms;
- (iv) The political element entails that women have the capability to analyse, organise and mobilise for social change; and
- (v) There is a physical element of gaining control over one’s body and sexuality and the ability to protect oneself against sexual violence to the empowerment process.

#### **The parameters of women empowerment are:**

- Raising self-esteem and self-confidence of women.
- Elimination of discrimination and all forms of violence against women and girl child.
- Building and strengthening partnership with civil society particularly women’s organizations.
- Enforcement of constitutional and legal provisions and safeguarding rights of women.
- Building a positive image of women in the society and recognizing their contributions in social, economic and political sphere.



- Developing ability among women to think critically.
- Fostering decision-making and collective action.
- Enabling women to make informed choices.
- Ensuring women's participation in all walks of life.
- Providing information, knowledge, skills for self-employment.
- Elimination of discrimination against women's participation in the areas of:
  - Access to food
  - Equal wages
  - Property rights
  - Family resources
  - Freedom of movement and travel
  - Access to credit
  - Control over savings, earnings and resources
  - Guardianship and custody of children and their maintenance
- Gender sensitization training in schools, colleges and other professional institutions for bringing about institutional changes.

Women have to swim against the stream that requires mere strength. Such strength comes from the process of empowerment. The women empowerment can be done through providing proper education, health and nutrition facilities.

#### **INDICATORS OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT:**

Beijing Conference 1995 had identified certain quantitative and qualitative indicators of women empowerment. These indicators are discussed below:

##### **Qualitative Indicators:**

- (i) Increase in self-esteem, individual and collective confidence;
- (ii) Increase in articulation, knowledge and awareness on health, nutrition reproductive rights, law and literacy;
- (iii) Increase in personal leisure time and time for child care;
- (iv) Increase on decrease of workloads in new programmes;
- (v) Change in roles and responsibility in family and community;
- (vi) Visible increase on decrease in violence on women and girls;
- (vii) Responses to, changes in social customs like child marriage, dowry, discrimination against widows;
- (viii) Visible changes in women's participation level attending meetings, participating and demanding participation;
- (ix) Increase in bargaining and negotiating power at home, in community and the collective;
- (x) Increase access to and ability to gather information;
- (xi) Formation of women collectives;
- (xii) Positive changes in social attitudes;

(xiii) Awareness and recognition of women's economic contribution within and outside the household;

(xiv) Women are decision-making over her work and income.

#### **Quantitative Indicators:**

(a) Demographic trends

- Maternal mortality rate
- fertility rate
- sex ratio
- life expectancy at birth
- average age of marriage

(b) Number of women participating in different development programmes;

(c) Greater access and control over community resources/government schemes—creche, credit cooperative, non-formal education;

(d) Visible change in physical health status and nutritional level;

(e) Change in literacy and enrollment levels; and

(f) Participation levels of women in political process.

#### **STRATEGIES OF EMPOWERING WOMEN:**

Empowerment of the women is a means to poverty alleviation. The goals of poverty eradication can be effectively achieved if women could be organized into groups for community participation as well as for assertion of their rights. Any strategy of sustainable development relating to poverty eradication has to involve the large number of poor women. Social mobilization and building organization of the poor are essential prerequisites for poverty alleviation. There are several strategies, which enable overall development of women. The following strategies were found more effective for overall development. They are:

1. Empowerment of women through development of women and children in the rural areas/ Self-Help Groups.
2. Empowerment of women through education and training.
3. Empowerment through political participation.
4. Empowerment evaluation as strategies of empowering women.

These different strategies are not independent and exclusive but used interactively.

#### **1. Empowerment of women through DWCRA/SHG approach:**

Women's empowerment is used to alleviate poverty and other socio-economic issues. Self -Help movement through thrift and savings has been taken of as a mass movement under the government program of development of women and children in the Rural Areas (DWCRA), some of the State Governments assisted these self- help groups by providing revolving fund and helping them in micro-enterprise activities. DWCRA program of self-help groups helped the women to earn additional income. With improvement in economic status, there is enhancement in social status as well. These women show

increased awareness of family welfare, promote their children's nutritional and educational status, shows concern about environment and health, issues of sanitation and drinking water.

Thus mobilizing the poor women in rural areas for self-help group formation either State Government assisted SHGs or SHGs assisted by Non-Government Organization is an effort toward participation of women in poverty alleviation and subsequently increases their awareness towards various social problems. Building the common corpus is the first step toward empowerment of women. The support mechanisms like government and non-government organizations provide the poor women a partnership. The poor collectively can start income generation activities with their own resources to achieve self-reliance with the support of this organization. Thus, starting from the socio-economic base the poor women show increasing awareness, cooperation, self-reliance, self-management and move towards social consciousness, empowerment and self-respect. The emancipation of the women from economic and social bondage enables to become more productive. The establishment of a self-reliant activity will mutually reinforce the process of promoting positive attitudes and values.

## **2. Empowerment of women through education and training:**

One of the most critical components in the development of a society is the investment in human development. The South Asian countries are poorest, most illiterate, malnourished and least gender-sensitive. In India public primary education facilities have been expanded and national literacy shows an increase of 38 percent in 1991 to 65.38 percent in 2001. Participation of women in education program has grown faster than those of men. Female literacy increased two the half times faster than male literacy between 1970 and 2001. However, these achievements are small as India still accounts for 30 percent of the total adult literates all over world, where 24 percent of girls of primary age are still not in school compared with 16 percent of boys. Poverty and other economic and social pressure continue to be the major challenge to the achievement of education for all. Keeping girls out of the school is costly and undermines developments. Poverty can be effectively tackled by educating the girls. Educated women keep their families healthier, show concern about their children's education and nutrition. Total literacy campaign started by the National Literacy Commission in some regions in India brought rapid social change. The Non-Government Organization (NGOs) plays a significant role in the area of education. To large extent the NGO activities have been confined to non-formal education sector. Various NGOs are participating in the formal education sector, for example, Action Aid, Plan International, Aga Khan Foundation etc. NGO action in primary education emphasizes delivery system of quality education to the marginalized people like, poor women and girls. Programs of formal and non-formal education are emphasized by the government in collaboration with local NGOs and the communities. The NGOs use the strategy of popular education in spreading knowledge among people. This is seen in people's participation in developing "IEC" (Information, Education and Communication) package of spreading knowledge about HIV/AIDS, health promotion, environmental risks, etc. In the popular education, cultural forms of education are used like, drama, music, stories, etc. Popular education is effective in increasing awareness towards various social issues like, immunization, girls' education, sexual harassment, etc. Popular education can be applied anywhere, adapting to local context, the ideology and culture of the people within the existing political



system. Thus, the NGOs can play a significant role in empowering women through education and training and it is also the basis in the strategy of women's participation in political field.

### **3. Political participation and empowerment:**

There is low representation of women at all levels of political institutions. Women still face major obstacles in seeking higher positions in society. Political participation is a human right, recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Women are poorly represented at different levels of political life and decision-making. In India, the process of politically empowering through reservation in the local bodies has helped in the wider mobilization. On many occasions, elected women have provided the leadership for organizing women and get their legitimate demands fulfilled like, widow pensions, gas connections, etc.

There is a growing realization among the women that local elections are a means to bring positive change in their lives. In different parts of the country, the SHGs have jointly put a women candidate for the election in the local bodies such as ZilaParishad, Gram Panchayat, etc. Women are motivated to change the traditions. The women's political campaigns refer to solving the issues that affect their daily lives like safe drinking water, schools, health centres, roads, etc. some women have taken the agenda further by displaying a mature understanding of the contexts in which the political economy functions. In our society men, having attitudes resist the political empowerment of women. There is a feeling that women should only contest the reserved seats and not the general seats. In some parts of our country, there is some change, for example, women in the villages of the Hill State of Uttaranchal are waging their own political battle of assertion and articulation of identification. Several NGOs working in the area tries to educate women about the voting behaviour and election procedures. Elected women members learn to negotiate their newfound positions in an inherently male dominated system, fighting the adverse institutionalized practices like, corruption. Women face many obstacles while contesting election such as sabotage, threats, boycott and pressure from family. However, women on gaining the political power can bring rapid change in the lives of other women and attain equality.

### **4. Empowerment evaluation and strategy of empowering women:**

Empowerment evaluation is the basis of empowering women and community development. Empowerment evaluation reflects the process of participatory communication. SHG formation, popular education and political participation are all based on the process of participatory communication. Empowerment evaluation as a capacity building process is based on the principles of participatory inquiry research and evaluation. Its objective is to highlight community member's own knowledge and to empower them. This can be attained by participating the women in each stage of program development that is, need assessment program, objectives, implementation monitoring and evaluation. Empowerment evaluation would promote self-determination and community control. The traditional evaluation is done by the professional experts, usually for funding of the organization. It is a close decision-making process and community participation is limited to providing feedback. In the empowerment or participatory evaluation there is shared responsibility and decision making power lies with the participants. In the empowerment evaluation participants not only are evolved but also control the process.

Despite its focus on self-determination and collaboration empowerment evaluation and traditional external evaluation are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the empowerment evolution process produces a rich data source that enables a more complete external examination. Self-determination defines as the ability to decide one's own course in life, forms the basis of empowerment evaluation. It consist of numerous interconnected capabilities such as the ability to identify and express needs, establish goals or expectations and plan of action to achieve them, identify resources, make rational choices from various alternative, take appropriate steps to pursue the objectives and evaluate the results. Women face resistance because a traditional social structures, norms and values. NGOs can facilitate the process by training the people. Training, facilitation, advocacy and liberation are the facets of empowerment. Liberation means being freed or freeing oneself from pre-existing roles and constraints. It often involves conceptualization of oneself and others. Empowerment evaluation can also be liberating, as women liberate them from traditional expectations and roles, find new opportunities in perceiving existing resources in all new light, and redefine their identities and future roles. Empowerment evaluation is a long-term process resulting improvement of quality of life of community with support from development agencies.

### **THE ROLE OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA:**

Empowering women usually involves giving them opportunity for better education. Focus on the overall development in India is the main work of women empowerment commission in India. Basically as per the human rights there should be the same place to men and women but society doesn't accept this situation and made the discrimination in society. When we study the evolution of man, it is noticed that gradually women tilled towards secondary place and started the exploitation through various problems. To stop and eradication of these problems, the women commission established by Govt. of India. After independence the direction has been fixed and various acts, plans have been started for the women development in India. Definitely we can say that India has done the improvement in social, economical and political status of women. Again there is need to strictly implementation and development of scheme and plans started by Government of India.

### **Following are some plans for the women development and empowerment:**

Indian government is always few rebel and conscious about women development. Time to time different schemes and plans has been implemented for the success of women.

#### **1. Mahilacoshyojana:**

This is first plan started for especially rural women of India in which self-employment, stress on msme and supplementary occupation are the most priority factors.

#### **2. Training and employment programme for women (TEPW):**

To build up the confidence, economically strong and for enhancing the productivity are the main targets of this plan.

#### **3. RashtriyaMahilaKosh (RMK):**

For social and economic changes, financial improvements through various programmes are the main objects of this plan. Micro finance to poor women, agriculture women, shop keeping and handcrafts etc are important objects of this plan.



**4. Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (RGSEAG):**

This is especially well-known for the overall development of teen age girls for the issues like nutrition, education, medical facilities and eradication of the different problems

**5. Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB):**

This scheme is especially famous for stimulation of the NGO which work for development of women.

**7. Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojana (IGMSY):**

For the improvement to the health and nutrition status of pregnant, lactating women and infants, child vaccination with sort out the various problems.

**8. Swayam Siddha Yojana:**

Creation of self-help groups with financial support and availability the fund for poor women in society.

**9. Short Stay Home for Women and Girls (SSH):**

Arrangement of temporary accommodation of deprived, mentally affected, very poor, widow, exploited and rejected by society and family. With the help of this plan various works knowledge given and try to become self to such type of women.

**10. Swadhar:**

This plan is especially for the support of women those really want to do the advance type of work. Some financial support given by government to start the occupations.

Best Women Illustration



**GOVERNMENT ENACTMENTS:**

The National Commission for Women has in the last few years introduced several new bills in the parliament from time to time towards eradication of many social evils. Some of the significant enactments are mentioned here.

- **The Hindu Widow Re-Marriage Act of 1856:**

In the traditions at Hindu society there was a ban on widow remarriage — it was one of the most important evils from which women in the traditional Hindu society suffered a lot. This act allowed widow to remarry and section 5 of this Act ensured her to enjoy all the rights, which a married woman did.

- **The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929:**

The practice of child marriage was another social evil from which women in traditional Hindu society suffered a lot. Age at marriage for girls was 9 or 10 and after passing this act the minimum marriageable age of women was fixed to 15 years. Later this age was increased up to 18 years.

- **The Hindu Women's Right to Property Act of 1937:**

In the traditional society women had no property rights. In the eyes of law she was a minor or ward. This act recognized a widow of a deceased person as a surviving personality with the same right as his in the joint property. Thus, through this Act women in the Hindu society received the property right to a limited extent.

- **The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 :**

This Act has recognized the equal rights of men and women in the matters of marriage and divorce. Under the provision of this Act either the man or woman can present a petition in a court of law for divorce, wife has got equal right to divorce husband.

- **The Hindu Succession Act of 1956:**

This Act recognized an equal right for women in the matter of inheritance of property. She can inherit the property of her father along with her brothers. She can also sell or mortgage the inherited property or use it for herself. For the first time absolute ownership was conferred to a woman through this Act.

- **The suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Act of 1956-57**

This Act aims to deal with the problem of prostitution and to promote the welfare of fallen women. Main objectives of this Act are to reduce the scope of prostitution and to reform prostitution under this Act. Every state is expected to set up protective home and to appoint women police and women social workers. In protective homes these fallen women will be given training in tailoring, toy and basket making and other crafts so that they may earn for their maintenance in proper way.

- **The Dowry Prohibition Act 1961:**

The main objective of this Act is to abolish giving and taking dowry at the time of marriage. The term dowry refers to a valuable property or thing, which is determined by the parties to a marriage for a marriage. The practice of dowry had produced very bad effects. Dowry system, dowry cases have not been reduced. Still this Act makes some effort in bringing social change.

Empowerment-



**Empowered Women.**



## CONCLUSION:

Empowerment of women enhanced....

- Acquiring knowledge and understand of gender relations and the ways in which these relations may be changed.
- Developing a sense of self-worth, a belief in one's ability to secure desired changes and the right to control one's life.
- Gaining the ability to generate choices and exercise bargaining power.
- Developing the ability to organize and influence the direction of social change, to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally.



The concept of empowerment of women is established psychological sense of personal control in the persons, domestic, social and political realms. It is a process by which one is authorized to think, act and control resources in an autonomous way.

The most critical component of women's empowerment is found to be education. It leads to improved economic growth, low fertility rate, health and sanitation and an awareness of factors that disempowered women. Work participation rate and political participation also grows in women's education.

Community awareness on the benefits of empowering women should be carried out in order that the empowerment may be supported by the community as whole. Awareness programme, education and positive role of every indivisible will help to development the status of women in India. Strictly implementation, creation and support of legislative, judiciary will be beneficial to sort out the women related problems in India. To stop the women exploitation, rape sexually harassment, acid throwing, domestic violence, child marriages and female feticide with effective instruments and control on these problems.

Among strategies for women empowerment, Government policies such as 73 and 74<sup>th</sup> amendment of Indian Constitution, Reservation policies, concessions, social legislation and enactment of certain acts were found to be very important. However, the effect of such strategies failed to reach the target due to various bureaucratic and systemic failures.

In this regard, the SHG approach towards women empowerment is found to be highly promising and effective. In the next chapter, we shall discuss in detail how SHGs mediate economic empowerment of women.

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