

Empowering Indian Women

J. Ramesh Sundar¹, S.Sudha²

Abstract: The Indian Constitution ensures equality to men and women by including Part III which guarantees Fundamental Rights to all citizens. It also allows the state to make positive discrimination in favour of women. To realise this ideal, the government has taken various measures for the advancement of women in all spheres. The various developmental policies and programmes of the government have aimed at the welfare of women.

In India, women are divided in terms of caste, class, education, occupation and place of residence. Among these different categories of women, while some have the advantage of education and employment and are able to compete with others to achieve their goals, a large number of them are in disadvantageous conditions and have to face oppression and exploitation.

The status of women is related to socio-economic and political conditions and aspects like education, health, religion, family structure and customs have influenced the role of women over the years. But it cannot be denied that urbanization and modernization and the development of science and technology have had a considerable impact on the lives of women.

A democratic socio-economic order requires that all citizens enjoy their liberty and equality in a proper way. Denial of liberty and equality will lead to gross violation of human rights. Enabling the citizens to enjoy their rights and also integrating all of them into the developmental process is a challenge for the government because a variety of factors influence the lives of people. This becomes a more difficult issue when it concerns women.

In recent years it has been increasingly felt that certain traditional and cultural factors, illiteracy, poor health conditions and malnutrition, lack of awareness and opportunities and lack of access to resources have been the reasons for the backwardness of women. It has also been recognized that women make one half of the society and thus are half the potential of the nation. When women are deprived of their basic requirements and are not given the opportunity to take decisions regarding their own lives, they face serious problems which affect not only the women but their families also. Thus it is necessary to change their lives by developing and empowering them.

As bringing a positive change in the lives of women is necessary for the development of the nation, the paper tries to bring out the constitutional provisions relating to women, gives the need and importance of women empowerment and attempts to analyse the various strategies to be used to empower women.

1. CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS

The Preamble of the Indian constitution gives the basic philosophy of the constitution

providing for social, economic and political justice to all the citizens of the country. Article 15 provides for prohibition of discrimination against women on grounds of religion, race, sex or place of birth. Article 15(3) empowers the state to make special provisions for women and children. Article 16 gives equality of opportunity in matters of public employment. Article 21 guarantees protection of life and personal liberty.

The Directive Principles of State Policy provides for the right to adequate means of livelihood, equal pay for equal work for men and women and provision for just and humane conditions of work and maternity relief. Article 44 states that the state shall strive to bring Uniform Civil Code in our country. In the list of Fundamental Duties Article 15 (A) (e) states that it shall be the duty of every citizen of India to promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India and to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women. Article 326 of the constitution guarantees political equality to women. The constitution adopts Universal Adult Franchise for elections and Article 325 prohibits exclusion from electoral rolls on the basis of sex.¹

2. MEANING OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

The term empowerment is related to the marginalized groups - the poor and the illiterates. It has also come to include women as women have also been oppressed over the years and have been facing various constraints in exhibiting their abilities and potentials.

Empowerment literally means “becoming powerful.” Whether it is empowerment in general or women empowerment in particular the concept relates to having power and control over resources and upon oneself.² It is a multi-dimensional process which enables women to take up opportunities and realise their full potential. It gives them the courage to break away from superstitious practices and have access to knowledge and resources. It helps them to take right decisions with regard to their lives.

Empowerment does not include just one sphere of a woman’s life. It is a holistic approach which includes the social, economic and political lives of women. The improvement of women’s social, economic and political status and their development and empowerment is essential for the sustainable development of any country.

As Indian women are placed in a peculiar situation because of historical and cultural reasons, women’s development is given priority in all the developmental plans. The Five Year Plans have given importance to women welfare, development and empowerment. Governments have also taken measures like reservation of seats for women in local bodies so that they can take active part in the governing process.

The shift in the approach of the government from welfare to development and from development to empowerment is a very significant one. It makes women not only beneficiaries of the development programmes but also participants of the programmes. They contribute both to the success of the programme and also get benefitted out of it. Another important fact is that in such a process the women not only get empowered individually but also include other women thus leading to collective empowerment of women.

3. NEED FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

The role of men and women are well specified in a traditional Indian society. The family structure in most part of India is patriarchal. It perpetuates inequality between men and women which is further aggravated by the diversity in caste, class and religion. Discrimination against the girl child and gender inequality in the Indian society is associated with traditional gender stereotyping.³ The girl child faces discrimination right from the time of her birth. Even till today there is a preference for male children in almost all the states in India. Having a son is considered to be a pride while having a daughter is considered a burden. The society has its own arguments with regard to this. The male child is seen as an asset as he will bring riches to the family while a daughter has to be married with huge dowry and has to be protected always. All this makes the society prefer sons.

Though women play an important role in the social, economic and cultural process directly or indirectly, women's productive work has not been recognized much. It is seen just as an extension of household work and is regarded as secondary to men's work which is considered to be productive work as they work outside the house and earn for their family. The works at home like cooking, cleaning, washing, child care, collection of fuel, fodder and water, rearing the livestock, working in the farm etc are all considered as only an extension of women's domestic work and not as productive work. The condition of rural women is worse than urban women. Urban women have the advantage of working in modernised and urbanised conditions and so their lives are easier than rural women. Rural women on the other hand are more tied with factors like illiteracy, poverty, traditional forces, poor health and lack of awareness regarding their rights.

The condition of working women is also not very encouraging. The women working in the unorganized sectors have many problems in terms of long working hours, unhealthy working conditions, unequal or low wages and lack of holidays and maternity leave. In the case of women working in the organised sectors, working hours, work load and time management become important issues. Apart from these issues verbal and physical harassments that women face in the hands of co-workers and superiors can be seen almost everywhere. This makes the lives of women a challenge which adds on to the challenge of balancing home and work. All these have constant pressure on women affecting their physical and mental health.

Added to these we also see women portrayed in an indecent manner in the media. Cinema and advertisements show women as objects of beauty and sex. Men alone cannot be blamed for this as women also are ready to take up such roles more for the financial benefit out of it. The increase of crime against women is another matter of grave concern for the whole society. The problem of crime against women is an extensive topic which needs to be discussed and analysed in length.

These combinations of factors have hindered the complete development of women. Though over the years many changes have come in the lives of women, more efforts have to be taken to improve their status and conditions. The influence of external forces and factors cannot be denied with respect to women but equally important is to equip women and allow them to use their own capabilities and potentials for their betterment so that bringing positive changes in their lives would be easy. It will also make them live a meaningful life. Thus empowerment of women becomes essential. Women have to be equipped in all spheres so that they can decide their lives.

Empowerment is required for women so that they can fulfil their needs and face the challenges of life in a better way. Only when women are given the opportunity to realise their potential, they will be able to contribute to the development of the nation.

4. THE PROCESS OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

The empowerment process enables women to gain the opportunities and advantages which they justly deserve. It is based on the idea that women have different capabilities and it is essential to identify these capabilities and share it for the benefit of the society. As human development has gained more importance in the recent years, empowerment attempts to ensure participation of people in formulating, executing and evaluating decisions affecting the society. This is applicable to women empowerment also.

According to our former President Pratiba Patel, the pillar of women's empowerment essentially consists of literacy, education, better health facilities and nutrition for the mother and the child, political representation and financial security including opportunities for self-employment options to become self-reliant. All this is dependent on making women aware of their rights, making them feel proud of being women, creating a conducive atmosphere and giving them opportunities to live a life of dignity.⁴

Empowerment makes women take responsibilities and become accountable for their decisions. It enables them to get justice and the opportunity to use all their resources for the protection of their lives and the betterment of their living conditions. For this it is necessary that appropriate strategies are used by the governmental agencies to reach all strata of women. Non-governmental organizations have to work with the government and the initiative and involvement of women themselves is also very important.

The process of empowerment aims to increase the capacity of women and equip them with the resources to lead their lives. The first requirement is to take care of the basic needs of women. Women have to get the benefits of the various welfare schemes of the government. Equally important is the decision making ability of women where women are given enough choice and allowed to take decisions. Increasing the awareness and consciousness of women is also important to empower women. Though opposing the family and the community and taking decisions is not very easy for women, awareness about their rights and their conditions will help women to a great extent. Knowledge and awareness will make them self confident and will improve their self esteem. The attitudes of the family and society towards women's issues have to be changed which is actually not a very easy process.

Making women self reliant is another very important way to empower women. Women have to be given equal opportunities with regard to ownership of property so that they have access to resources. Concentration has to be given towards skill development and capacity building of women. When the skills of women are developed to make them get involved in some productive activity, they will be able to become economically independent. When they have financial resources with them, they gain a lot of confidence and it also increases their bargaining power. Though it is not an easy task, for the illiterate and poor women, the government have to think of right and appropriate strategies to do this. The idea of organising women into Self Help Groups and enabling them access to micro-credit and developing their skills has been a good initiative to empower women.

With regard to being a part of the decision making process, not many women are ready to take up politics as a career. The challenges that women face in political life is far more than what men have to face. Added to this are family responsibilities and oppositions from family members which do not encourage many women to be very active in public life. Thus we see lesser percentage of women in politics which has to change over the years.

The empowerment process has to be a gradual one. It requires a basic realization and awareness of one's potentialities. For women it involves the condition where women have greater control over their lives and are able to take decisions regarding their lives at home, in society and in the state. When the empowerment process begins in one woman, she will have an impact on other women and this will be a chain reaction.

5. REFERENCES

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*1Associate Professor and Head, Department of Political Science, Madras
Christian College, Chennai.*

2Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Madras Christian College, Chennai.