

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract: Women's empowerment is a novel axiom in the lexis of gender literature. The promotion of gender equality and empowering of women is one of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDG) to which India is a signatory. But pathetically, gender inequality, despite much progress, remains among the greatest challenges of our times. In India, women were never given the right of liberty and equality with substance. Their condition becomes even worse when they gave birth to girls. Men treated them in a humiliated manner. They are not only confined within four walls but also denied access to education. The paper reveals that women in India are accorded lower status than their counterparts notwithstanding numerous efforts have been exploited by the government. Most of the hurdles to women's empowerment are deep-seated in the minds of people. Lack of access to education, mobility, workforce participation, land and property rights, political participation and crimes against women are major challenges that need to be addressed to make empowerment of women a reality.

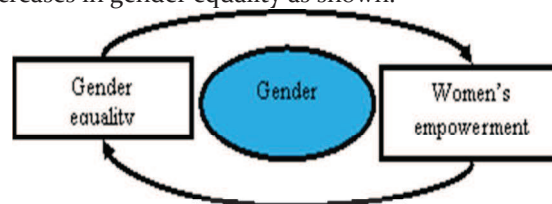
Keywords: Empowerment, India, Gender-equality.

Introduction: For centuries women were not treated equal to men in many ways. They were not allowed to own property, no voting rights, no freedom to choose their work or job and so on. Now there is a need for strong movement to fight for the rights of women and to ensure that they get all the rights which men have or in other words a movement for the Empowerment of Women. The majority of the world's poorest people are women and girls. This, in itself, demonstrates the urgent need for a specific focus on women and girls. It is estimated that women account for two thirds of the 1.4 billion people currently living in extreme poverty and make up 60 percent of the 572 million working poor in the world (ILO: 2009: p 43). Further, women account for two thirds of the world's 774 million illiterate adults (UN: 2010). This has remained unchanged for the past two decades. Women spend at least twice as much time as men on domestic work, and when all work (paid and unpaid) is taken into account, women work longer hours than men do. The report estimated that the global financial crisis resulted in 16 million more unemployed women between 2007 and 2009 and that women were pushed into informal and unsafe jobs at a faster rate than men were.

The study analyses the state of women empowerment in India. The paper has been divided into four parts. First part contains concept and approaches of women's empowerment. The present scenario of women's empowerment in India is presented in the second part. The third part analyses the major challenges for the phenomenon of women's empowerment in India. The conclusion is incorporated in the final part.

Women's Empowerment - Concept and Approaches: Women's empowerment is closely related to, but goes beyond, gender equality to cover not just women's condition relative to men's, but their power to make choices and their ability to control their own destiny (HRW: 2012). It must go hand in hand with efforts to address gender inequality. Women should be empowered to make choices and decisions and to use

their rights, resources and opportunities. Important elements of women's empowerment include access to and control over resources, meaningful political participation, the reduction of women's unpaid care responsibilities, and the ability to have control over their own bodies such as living free from violence and making decisions in relation to fertility. The pairing of the two concepts of women's empowerment and gender equality into one MDG implicitly recognizes that gender equality and women's empowerment are two sides of the same coin: progress toward gender equality requires women's empowerment and women's empowerment requires increases in gender equality as shown.



(Source: Kishor and Gupta: 2009: p 9)

The World Bank has identified empowerment as one of the key constituent elements of poverty reduction and as a primary development assistance goal. Beijing Declaration (1995) presented women's empowerment as a key strategy for development and stated that "women's full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision making process and access to power are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace". Another line of thought in development literature has promoted 'social inclusion' in the institutions as the key pathway to empowerment of individuals; and capitalism top-down approaches to development. This process of social inclusion was viewed as a process that removes the institutional barriers and the enhancement of incentives to increase the access of diverse individuals and groups to assets and development opportunities (Hanny: 2006).

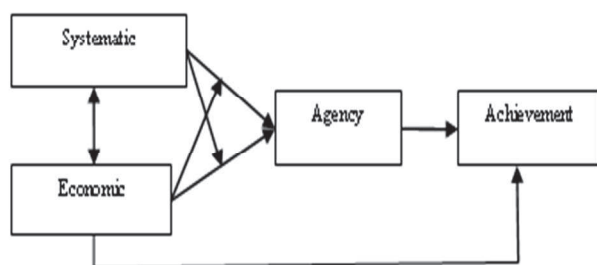
The Modern Approach: In recent years the concept of "empowerment" was modified to include "the power in

plural form as “powers”. This “powers” approach was picked up by several feminist bodies and development NGOs which have argued that empowerment process should be broken down in four levels of power – power over, power to, power with and power within. Hence, it is argued that the basic objective of development should be the ‘expansion of human capabilities’ (Dreze and Sen,

| Gender Gap (sub-indices) | India | | Sri Lanka | |
|--|-------|-------|-----------|-------|
| | Rank | Score | Rank | Score |
| Economic participation and opportunity | 124 | 0.446 | 109 | 0.559 |
| Educational attainment | 121 | 0.857 | 48 | 0.995 |
| Health and survival | 135 | 0.931 | 1 | 0.980 |
| Political Empowerment | 9 | 0.385 | 30 | 0.274 |
| Overall Index | 101 | 0.655 | 55 | 0.702 |

1995). The expansion of human capabilities empowers the people and facilitates the reduction of social and economic inequalities. Attempts were made to separate the gender and economic components of empowerment by combining the models of empowerment proposed by Kabeer (1999). Kabeer identified three main elements of empowerment: the first one is the preconditions of empowerment which include economic as well as human and social resources. The second one is ‘achievements’. Gender norms and economic resources must act as preconditions to exercise the power that positively affects the demographic outcomes (social opportunities) and also to have an independent influence on these “achievements”. Alternatively, empowerment is “the expansion of people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them. Based on these arguments, efforts were made to build models that separate the gender and economic components of empowerment proposed by Kabeer (1999), Paula (2000) and Williams (2005) as shown in figure 1.

Figure-1: Conceptual Model of Women Empowerment



Source: (Williams: 2005: p 35)

Women’s Empowerment in India: Present Scenario: As the table 1 shows that the rankings and scores for India amply proves that it is found in the lower rank even compared to Sri Lanka in all sub-indexes of gender

equality except political empowerment. India gained twelve places (from 113 rank in 2011 to 101 rank in 2013) as a result of improvements in the educational attainments and political empowerment. Among the BRIC economies, India is the lowest ranked featured in the index. The report has observed that the persistent health, education and economic participation gaps are acting as detrimental forces to India’s growth. The disproportionate sex ratio at birth has not changed over the past years (WEF, 2013).

Source: Global Gender Gap Index (2013), p 223.

The Challenges of Women’s Empowerment in India: In spite of the effective implementation of various schemes and programmes, there are significant gaps between achievements and actual practice at the community level. Despite repeated claims of progress by the Government, there was no significant improvement in access to health care and education. According to the latest statistics released by World Economic Forum(2013) indicate that the current situation of gender gaps is alarming and India ranks after our neighbor country Sri Lanka in all sub-indices except in political empowerment. Women in India are facing myriad challenges these are as following.

Women and Education:No doubt, India has attained significant improvement in women’s literacy which was 8.9 % in 1951, improved to 65.5 % as on 2011. As a result the male-female gap in literacy has narrowed down from 26.6% in 1981 to 16.7% in 2011. In spite of the implementation of programmes like ‘Sarva Siksha Abhiyan’, still 21.8% of the girl children (6-17 years age) were found out of schools. Although the gender differential in literacy has declined over time, the differential remains high even in the youngest age group among those 15-19 years of age, the percentage of females who are literate (74%) which is 15% less than the males (89%). The National Family Health Survey-3 (2009) observed that there are great disparities in literacy by wealth especially for women.

Women and Employment: Employment can also be an important source of empowerment for women, particularly for economic empowerment. Employment empowers women by providing financial independence, alternative source of social identity and exposure to power structures. NHFS-3 data reveal that women’s employment both in rural and urban areas is very low compared with men, particularly in urban areas. It is also found that 49.4% of the women are employed in rural areas as the agricultural work is typically more compatible with women’s responsibilities as well as with low education. Employment by age also exhibits a serious gender gap. Employment is found at peak in all the age groups for men, whereas for women it is found at peak in the age group of 30-39 years (also for males). In each and every age group, the percentage of women employment is low compared to that of men in our country.

Participation in Household Decisions: NFHS-3 has collected data on how women are participating in

several other decisions and who usually makes them. Specifically, decisions related to own health care, large household purchases and visits to family or relations are considered for analysis and the gender differential is presented in table-2.

| SN | Type of Decision | Make Decisions | |
|----|------------------------------------|----------------|---------|
| | | Alone | Jointly |
| 1 | Own health care | 27.1 | 35.1 |
| 2 | Large household purchase | 8.5 | 44.4 |
| 3 | Visits to her parents or relations | 10.7 | 49.8 |
| | All decisions | 15.4 | 43.1 |

(Source: Kishor and Gupta: 2009: p 89)

The data on specific decisions and how they are being taken by the women exhibit that 73%, 91% and 89% of women even today are not able to take decisions alone with respect to their own health care, large household purchases and could not decide themselves even to visit their family or relatives respectively.

Access to Resources: Access to resources is important for economic freedom of women as freedom of movement is linked with their economic independence and also infuses with power and expands agency. NFHS-3 data shows that women's access to resources is dismally poor in our country. The data show that only 22.0% of women have access to resources in general and at disaggregate level it is seen that a meager 38.6% of women know about the loan programmes and only 10.5 % of women could get a loan. It is quite disappointing to note that the women who have a bank saving account was found very low at 15.07% and in spite of knowing about loan programmes, they have failed to secure a loan. 36.4% of the women had the freedom to work in outside. These variables are closely associated with level of education; the higher education is a potent source of empowerment.

Freedom of Movement: Freedom of movement, no doubt, is an important indicator for measuring empowerment of women particularly to the places outside the home and community. However, particularly in India, movement of women is seriously curtailed for larger portion of women due to a variety of social, religious and economic reasons. NFHS-3 data points out

that only one third of women age 15-49 are allowed to go alone to outside the home in general. In particular the data reveal that as age of women increases, the percentage of women allowed to go alone to the three places also increases. There is a correlation between the education, wealth and access to spaces outside the home. The data reveals that only 32% of women without education were allowed to go alone to all the three places and it increases to 48.2% with more than 12 years of education. Similarly 74% of the women, who belong to lowest quintile of wealth and 56% of women with highest wealth status could not go alone to all these three places. It seems in India, even educated and women with high wealth status are not having the opportunity to go alone outside the home due to a variety of social, cultural and other reasons.

Spousal Violence: Domestic violence is one of the most common forms of gender-based violence experienced by women across the world. Domestic violence results into violation of human rights and economic costs. Living with constant threat of domestic violence is, as considered by experts, acts as a source of disempowerment of women. Domestic violence takes the forms like emotional, physical and sexual violence by their husbands. It was observed that 27% of currently married women age 15-49 have experienced the violence during a survey period of 12 months according to NFHS-3. 55% of women who have experienced physical and sexual violence reported that they were injured by their husbands.

Conclusion: Notwithstanding the remarkable changes in the position of women in free India there is still a great deviation between the constitutional position and stark reality of deprivation and degradation. Women of India are relatively disempowered and they enjoy somewhat lower status than that of men. Lack of social and economic empowerment, lack of political will, lack of gender culture, and traditional mind-set among others must be arrest to address the plight of women in India. Unless the attitude towards the acceptance of unequal gender role by the society and even the women themselves changed women cannot grab the opportunity provided to them through constitutional provisions, law etc. Till then we cannot say that women are empowered in India in real sense.

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