
EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN AND TOWARD A SOLUTION OF THE WOMEN PROBLEM

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Abstract: Empowerment of women may be taken to mean strengthening women's position in the socio-political power structure of the society. But empowerment in this sense cannot be achieved without strengthening women's position in the existing economic system. This means creating both more social opportunities and capacities for women so that they can participate in effective and significant manner in the functioning of the economic system of the society.

Empowerment of women cannot be a separate agenda having no connection with women's struggle against existing social system, economic policies, values and culture which out to enforce women's subjugation and degradation. While concentrating efforts to gain more opportunities to participate in significant and effective way in the development process and share in the power structure, women should also launch struggle against the system that cause their total subjugation and degradation. The solution to the problem lies not just in striving for getting more share in the existing system but in launching struggle against the system itself, which goes fundamentally against their interest.

Introduction: Empowerment of women may be taken to mean strengthening women's position in the socio-political power structure of the society. But empowerment in this sense cannot be achieved without strengthening women's position in the existing economic system. This means creating both more social opportunities and capacities for women so that they can participate in effective and significant manner in the functioning of the economic system of the society. While these provide necessary conditions for women's empowerment, the targeted outcome of such empowerment is supposed to be the creation of conditions that would enable women to play decisive roles in the family and society equally with their male counterparts, so that question of oppressions, discriminations, injustice, deprivation and degradation for women as a group would turn to be totally irrelevant. The three major practical steps that are suggested for achieving the purpose are: expanding the opportunities for women's education, creating conditions for their greater participation in the social process of production and introducing necessary changes in the existing system of law and judiciary to protect women's interest, rule out injustice and discrimination against them and enable them to participate in greater ways in the process of functioning of the government and political system. These practical steps for the solution to the women's question have been generally accepted in principle by almost all civilised societies today, though there is wide variation with regard to degree of importance attached to the principles and in the method and speediness of the process of translation of these principles into practice. As may be observed, the two major factors causing this variation are, variation with regard to general level of socio-economic development and variation with regard to importance of religious fundamentalism in the socio-political systems of different countries.

Women's participation in outside activities moreover cannot free them from their traditional responsibilities of household duties including child care. They are

typically looked as primarily housewives. As a result large part of women's energies and mental and physical capacities remain confined to these duties which make it much more difficult for them to take out a position side by side with their male counterparts. In spite of all formal rights and opportunities open to them, their role in social production and related activities remain generally secondary and unimportant and notwithstanding the social benefits of their work, their work remain generally undervalued. Further, the capitalist system does not do away with the system of male lineage of inheritance and identity and father's natural guardianship of children. All these make women's role unimportant and secondary in social forces of production and insignificant even in the families. Not only the important social function that they perform in bearing and rearing of children goes unrecognized in capitalist society, all their skill, intelligence, efforts and performance in the social sphere of activities go unrecognized.

While capitalist state recognizes the right to break up marriage and remarriage for women; the system of rearing of children under the responsibility of family becomes inconsistent with these women rights. The system of male lineage of identity of children and male lineage of inheritance stands contradictory to women's freedom to break up marriage and it brings about inconsistencies solution of which goes beyond the capitalist system. More harmful is society's extremely degrading and derogatory attitude towards women, which makes them subject to such ultimate form of assault as rape. Incidence of rape which is assuming enormous proportions in so called civilized societies is nothing but an expression of extremely degrading attitude towards women in which women folk, irrespective of their age, social position and education are considered to be mere articles of the most perverse form of enjoyment and entertainment. In spite of all their empowerment they have achieved, in the most developed societies women continue to be viewed as articles of consumption and entertainment of the males.

Instead of doing away with women's traditional role of creating pleasure of men, it recognises prostitution as regular and normal means of livelihood for women. Their beauty and sexuality are highly priced in the market and purchased and used as an instrument for achieving commercial goals. Thus the system abuses the very concept of monogamy, though it upholds the need for maintaining monogamous family system as its basic unit for realisation of private property right. Women's empowerment under capitalism utterly fails to change society's general attitude towards women in highly developed capitalist countries of the world. Rather, it is reinforced as society increasingly comes under the all pervasive influence of commercialization which leads to a situation where co modification of women's body become more general and enter into the set of a accepted norms of the market economy. It is this general condition of subordination of women and their degradation in most developed countries which operate to keep women's question as a living issue on which women movements are built up by organised women bodies of various shades.

Thus is so for as men and women belonging to non-possessing classes have material ground to launch struggle against exiting system of class base oppression, they should be looked upon as powerful allies of the women groups aiming to overthrow patriarchal system of oppression. When men and women belonging to non-possessing classes organise struggle against the oppressive and exploitative policies launched by the state for the interest of the powerful possessing groups, such organised struggle in effect goes against the very basis of the existing patriarchal structure. On the other hand when women's struggle against patriarchy concentrate its organised struggle against the values, the culture, the social practices, state laws and economic policies-against everything which perpetuate patriarchy at the social level- it in effect goes against the interest of the powerful possessing lobbies controlling the system and may ultimately turn to be anti-state in character. Aim of such struggles with their essential anti-state characteristics may not be merely to achieve some democratic rights for women or to ensure increased share for women in the existing socio-political and economic structure. It is not merely to achieve greater amount of empowerment. Its ultimate aim is complete overthrow of the system of patriarchy. Women struggles that would be launched with such long term view must be different from innumerable struggles that are launched with short sighted vision, in their very characteristics. These essential characteristics are—first, such women's struggles must start with issues relating to economic policies, laws, customs and systems that are oppressive and highly exploitative specially against women belonging to working class, the lower rung of the middle class and the low and backward caste categories. In such struggles obviously it is the women belonging to these class and caste categories who are not only expected to come forward to take leading roles,

but they themselves being subject to sharpest oppression and exploitation under the existing system may act as the most dependable and basic subjective force in those struggles. Social issues relating to interests of all categories of women must also be taken up and give due importance at the second stage and should be linked up with the main struggle. Those issues which relate specially and almost exclusively to the interest of women belonging to privileged class and caste categories must also be taken up in the later stages but it is not desirable that such issues get exclusive and prime importance in the women movements.

In fact human relationship even when it takes the form closest personal and blood relationship contains complex set of contradictory aspects. On the one hand it contains variety of emotional and physical and psychological interdependence, mutual expectations, faith, enjoyment, love, affection, on the other hand it contains the aspects of domination and suppression of one by another prominence, bitterness and enmity. In fact a private property based society where inheritance of private property, attainment of private interest and satisfaction provide main motive of human existence and rights over private main source of power, human relationship is bound to be influenced by such motives and power. In the case of male female relationship even if it takes the form of closest personal relationship, all the complex contradictory aspects are presents and influence the nature of relationship to a great extent. Contradiction between sexes even within family contains different opposing aspects. Sometimes those aspects of the contradiction which arise out of strong influential. In so for as marriage relationship in this society may be an imposed relationship between husband and wife based on monetary calculation and personal. Convenience and lack of free choices, the relative strength of patriarchy and personal interest may be quite high in determining the nature of relationship in particular cases. In some circumstances the contradiction which is generally non-antagonistic may take extremely violent form. The cases of systematic physical violence and murder of wives by husbands and rape, raping of daughter by father and hundreds and thousand of similar cases provide illustration of this.

While women labour is used within domestic field their position remains the same even when they take part in social production. This is because even in social production their work is looked down upon as subsidiary ' and less important compared to that of the males. Even the work which the rural women often do within the domestic field which are important subsidiary work to production, for example, processing of rice etc.—goes unrecognised along with all forms of domestic work and does not get any value. Thus women labour is appropriated at three levels:—as domestic labour, as labour complementary to productive labour but performed within the family, and low paid social labour.

While in all present day society women are burdensd

double burden of domestic and outside work, in India burden of domestic labour is much more tedious and burdensome. It is not only because of absolute lack of facilities like crèches but also due to continuance of some habits, customs, ritual, do's and don'ts related with religious and caste system. Moreover, because of acute poverty and socio economic backwardness, living conditions among rural and urban poor is miserable for which women have to bear inhuman burden of domestic work like fetching water and fuel from long distance and catching fish, gathering leaves and vegetables from jungles.

Under this circumstances the socio-economic superstructure is remoulded in a way such their it can provide a cultural social environment most suitable for the economic interest of imperialism. This new cultural imperialism which has its roots in economic imperialism introduces far reaching changes in the lives of women of these countries without of course introducing fundamental change in basically feudal ideas and ideologies. Without the modern western concept of recognition of women's independent personality women remain subjugated throughout her life as daughter, wife and mother. The development of her personality is restricted by traditional values and practices. She still does not enjoy the right to choose her partner and break off marriage relations even if she feels it an oppressive burden. While the artificially created concept of gender attributes 'manly' and 'womanly' qualities to men and women in all society to keep women submissive to men, in India it takes much more vigorous form. It strongly demands one way sacrifice patience and affection from women in the face of all sorts of torture, deprivation and cruelty inflicted by men.

This social concept and value very often influences even the judicial and legal system so that to get proper judgement by law becomes a formidable task for woman. Since these societies have not experienced revolutionary change in the basically feudal production base most of the basic democratic values and concept of 'freedom' are absent. Without the basic concept of women's individualism women here remain subjugated throughout her life. Women in these countries are not even recognised as individual human beings. From their very childhood they are taught to demean themselves, not only they have no freedom in marriage and have to marry the man selected by the parents, marriage here is to take place within the same class, within the same caste and religion. Giving birth to children is not only a primary duty of a married women, it is the be all and end all of all women's sexuality. Their social status does not depend upon their own productive and social activities but on their capacity to produce children, their 'motherly' roles and the status of the man through whom their child is born, that is their husband.

Woman with children outside marriage is totally condemned by the society. The concepts of chastity, motherhood and womanhood are imposed upon them not only to make them to remain under the control of

the males but also conceal their torture and degradation-taking place within the family. The idea that women sexuality has to be protected by males and keeping them within families is so strong that single women outside the family, the divorcees and widows are often considered as open to sexual assault. It is very common to inflict attack and insult on their sexuality. Mainly under the influence of the western laws and western concept of women liberation and under the pressure of women's groups' demand for democratic and human rights, some new laws have been enacted in this country—ensuring women's right over parents' property more freedom in marriage, protection against rape, divorce, remarriage and prohibiting child marriage, polygamy, dowry etc.

Along with these laws women's education has also received some place of importance in the state policies. But either these laws contain consciously introduced serious defects, which make them totally ineffective or the machinery for their implementation remain ineffective through deliberate indifference. Women in these countries thus do not enjoy minimum rights; abject discrimination even within the family in the matter of distribution of food and health care facilities, scope of education and curricular activities, to which women are subjected from the very childhood, not only help to keep them dependent both economically and psychologically, but also leads to high rate of mortality of the female child, death at pregnancy and maternity and early loss of physical ability. Moreover the influence of traditional values and culture as Manu's dictum and Shariat make them subject to such inhuman social practices as dowry, talaq at will and sati. All these taken together make it difficult for women to take advantage of whatever minimum rights are permitted in law.

Moreover the influence of religion and casteism make their lives even more unbearable. It is due to the strong influence of communalism and fundamentalism that within each religious community women become subject to extreme form of oppression and degradation imposed by strongest religious codes of conduct, values and rituals. Upon this basic condition, imperialism imposes its culture of vulgar materialism and consumerism and ideology of individualism. The imposition of all these culture and values upon basically feudal structure leads to reimposition of practices like dowry in more vigorous and vulgar form. The influence of this culture and values lead increasingly to commodification of women bodies. Not only middle class, upper middle class and rich-, women; even working class, dalits and tribal women very easily fall victim to such culture and values.

The new economic policies sponsored by the IMF World -Bank further deteriorate women's condition in this country. First, restriction of government expenditure in services like health and education results in further deteriorating the extremely inadequate health care and education facilities available in the country which affect

both men and women of the economically weaker sections of the population. Women are specially affected since lack of adequate health care facilities affect mainly conditions of pregnant women, women at the time of child birth and the children belonging to the most poor sections of the population. Lack of educational facilities make it impossible specially for the girls living in remote rural areas to get opportunity of even primary school education. Whenever there is a cut in the budget it is naturally the poorest section and specially the women in that section who are affected. The MNC sponsored production structure which is heavily biased in favour of highly profitable luxury goods and against basic necessitation for the poor people, raise prices and also restrict employment opportunities, which again affect the lives of poor women most adversely. Landlessness, unemployment and poverty make lives of woman extremely miserable because it is the women who are to take care of households and bring up the children even if men remain indifferent.

Further, women in these countries are generally subject to most strict control on their maternity imposed by the state. The IMF-World Bank sponsored state economic policies can not eliminate poverty by providing adequate employment opportunities which leads to false notion of over-population and strict birth control measures imposed by the government, without any consideration being paid to the possible adverse effect on health of the women. IMF-World Bank sponsored economic policies further lead to under-utilization of available resources in the economy and further reduction in the rate of employment which means loss of employment opportunities for women. Due to undue emphasis of population control in the health care system of the government, family planning gets undue emphasis and priority with regard to allocation of funds. All other aspects of health care like adopting preventive measures for some kind of disease or reducing child mortality get less priority.

Apart from class exploitation and patriarchy there is also oppression due to age-old caste system which gives rise to a hereditary power structure based on differences in caste status, interlinked and strengthened by the structure of class exploitation. Caste system in India thus not only belongs to the super structure but also the economic base of the society based on class exploitation. Imperialism, reinforces caste based system of hereditary division of labour and age old degradation of the so-called lower caste people and utilises it in the context of already existing backwardness among certain caste groups to fulfil its economic interest by using them as sources of irregular and cheap labour and reserve army of unemployed. Women belonging to these so-called low caste categories became subject to limitless exploitation of the upper castes and imperialism. They in fact become subject to multidimensional form of oppression as women, as belonging to low caste and as belonging to low economic status. As women and belonging to the low caste category they are doubly

oppressed both by patriarchy and caste ideology, their oppression as women is much more intensified due to caste factor and caste oppression is much more strengthened because of being women. In the cases when they also form the exploited class, the degree of exploitation gets triply intensified.

This also applies as much too tribal women and increasingly to women belonging to minority communities.

Thus in countries like India women question is extremely complex and multi-dimensional. While empowerment of women by providing them with greater opportunity for education and employment and greater legal rights is a crying need of these countries, scope of such empowerment is severely limited by the nature of economic transformation these countries are undergoing. Though much advance has been gained in the matter of women literacy and enrolment in recent years, increasing landlessness and unemployment created through the process of jobless growth make it impossible for poor female children to stay in education for long. The increased commercialisation and increased role of the MNCs in the control and management of rural resources for commercial purposes make it much more difficult for women to manage a living for their children and family members. Thus empowerment of rural powerless women becomes almost impossible under this situation.

While government sponsored schemes of self employment accompanied with micro credit system adopted by the banks are expected to generate income and empower down-trodden rural women in their fight against poverty and patriarchy, success of such schemes greatly depend on availability of marketing facilities and raw materials at cheap rates as well as formation of requisite skill and capacities for the women in rural areas. Again success in this direction greatly depends on the nature of existing power structure exerting its influence on rural society and women's capacity to win favourable consideration for them. In less developed countries like India empowerment of women should be considered an essential prerequisite for liberation of women from patriarchal oppression. But their empowerment under existing socio-economic process would become a myth unless all attempts in the direction of full empowerment of women are accompanied with organised efforts to do away with the roots of subjugation, of women firmly entrenched in the socio economic process.

Empowerment of women can not be a separate agenda having no connection with women's struggle against existing social system, economic policies, values and culture which out to enforce women's subjugation and degradation. While concentrating efforts to gain more opportunities to participate in significant and effective way in the development process and share in the power structure, women should also launch struggle against the system that cause their total subjugation and degradation. The solution to the problem lies not just in

striving for getting more share in the existing system but in launching struggle against the system itself, which goes fundamentally against their interest.

This in more concrete terms, means approaching women's problem both as a problem of achieving more democratic and human rights and enhanced share in the existing system and as a problem of launching struggle against fundamental characteristic of the system which enforce patriarchy. In the context of present day developing society every expression of patriarchal oppression and degradation of women that take place at the social level through culture and values social practices and religious code of conducts should be totally opposed. All economic policies and social rules, customs and rituals that bring about deterioration of women's position both economically and socially, intensify their exploitation, increase their unemployment and degrade them through commodification of their bodies should be strongly attacked. Systematic campaign and attack should be continuously made against all those literature, cinemas, artistic performances and mode of entertainments which contain disrespectful and discriminatory elements against women degrade them and help to perpetuate women's subjugation by males through spreading of

patriarchal ideas and values. Loopholes of the existing laws against rape, polygamy, child marriage, dowry etc. - and also laws which are meant to ensure for women the freedom in marriage, rights of property, divorce, and remarriage etc. should be properly detected and broad based democratic movements should be organised with the purpose of reforming these laws and introducing new laws ensuring women's democratic rights. Measures of family planning that impose control over women's reproductive capacity and spread the use of birth control devices that are detrimental to women's health, should be totally attacked and rejected. The state should be pressurised to take increasingly the responsibility of children and children's education. Any incident of patriarchal oppression, rape or physical violence against women should be taken up immediately and struggle should be organised demanding punishment of the culprits. Women organisation should take up definite programmes to fight against caste system and caste base oppression against women. Programmes should also be taken up in support of workers movements, peasants' movement and students' movement on specific issues and also against any incident of imperialist war of aggression anywhere in the world.

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