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## EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA - FACTS AND REALITIES

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**Abstract:** “There is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of Women”- Kofi Annan, Former UN Secretary General.

Empowerment of women is one of the most important concerns of 21<sup>st</sup> century. The United Nations in its Millennium Summit, 2000 too declared ‘Gender Equality and Women Empowerment’ as one among the eight ‘Millennium Development Goal’ to be achieved by the year 2015. But practically women empowerment is still an illusion of reality. They experience helplessness in bringing about social changes for eliminating gender inequalities which is causing hindrance for their development. The process of empowerment of women is essentially the process of upliftment of economic, social and political status of women in the society. It is the process of guarding them against all forms of violence. Today many laws are passed protecting the rights of women, but yet it is a myth as to how far these laws are encouraging the overall development of women. This paper analyses the issues and challenges of women empowerment in India and attempts to make few suggestions in the light of findings.

**Keywords:** Development, Empowerment, Gender Discrimination, UNDP

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**Introduction:** Today we are living in the exciting times in terms of the development of human rights as a whole. Women’s human rights are also gaining momentum. The equal rights of men and women were first referred to in an international human rights context in the preamble of both UN Charter 1945 and Universal Declaration of Human Rights. A comprehensive declaration of women rights and their empowerment were also laid down in UN Convention on Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women. However, there is a pessimistic view that irrespective of the progress made in last 50 years, human rights of women are threatened than ever. Human rights abuses against women are not just about violations of the integrity of a person, who happens to be female. They stem from deep-seated cultural attitudes which denigrate the female sex to an inferior status with huge implications in terms of a woman’s employment opportunities, enjoyment of good health, protection from coercion and violence, and her legal status. In this regard Human Rights for Women requires firstly the setting of human rights standards, their acknowledgement by the international community and their adherence by state parties, but also the challenging of a wide range of fundamental cultural and religious beliefs. It is also the concern of the United Nation which has stated that gender equality and women empowerment, as one of the ‘Millennium Development Goal’ to be achieved by the year 2015. ‘Women Empowerment’ refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social, educational or economic strength of individuals and communities of women. In

India, women’s empowerment is dependent on many different variables that include geographical location, educational and social status and age. Empowerment of women is essentially the process of upliftment of

economic, social and political status of women, traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society. It is the process of guarding them against all forms of violence. Women empowerment involves the building up of a society, a political environment, wherein women can breathe without the fear of oppression, exploitation, apprehension, discrimination and the general feeling of persecution which goes with being women in a traditionally male dominated society. Women empowerment also implies the ability of the women take all the important decisions independently related to her throughout her life span that will ensure her success in all aspects of life. However these goals are far from being realized in a country like India.

**Crimes against women:** Women are often victims of various crimes. There are certain specific crimes directed against women only. New legislation has been brought and amendments have been made in the existing legislations with a view to handle these crimes effectively. The crimes against women are broadly classified into two categories-

**Crimes under IPC:** Rape, attempt to rape, Kidnapping and abduction of women, Dowry deaths, Assault with an intention to outrage her modesty, cruelty by husband and relatives, importation of girl from foreign country and abetment of suicide of women.

**Crimes under special and local laws-** there are some gender specific laws like The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961; The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986; The Sati Prevention Act, 1987; the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005; The Immoral Traffic Prevention Act, 1956. The crime rates in India committed against women is often assessed by the above specific crimes committed against women. The National Crime

Report Bureau reports the percentage of crimes across the country every year committed against the women.

The crime head wise details as reported by NCRB form the year 2010-2014 is given in Table 1.

A total of 3, 37,922 cases of crimes against women both under IPC and SLL were reported in the country during the year 2014 as compared to 3,09,546 in the year 2013, thus showing an increase of 9.2% during the year 2014.

The crime rate under crimes against women was reported as 56.3 in 2014. Delhi (UT) has reported the highest crime rate (169.1) compared to 56.3 at all India level during the year 2014, followed by Assam (123.4), Rajasthan (91.4).The proportion of IPC crimes committed against women towards total IPC crimes has increased during last 5 years from 9.6% in the year 2010 to 11.4% during the year 2014.

**Table 1: Crime against Women during 2010- 2014 and percentage variation**

Year 2010-2014	(a) Total IPC Crimes	(b) Total SLL Crimes	Total (a) +(b)
2010	2,05,009	8,576	2,13,585
2011	2,19,142	9,508	2,28,650
2012	2,32,528	11,742	2,44,270
2013	2,95,896	13,650	3,09,546
2014*	3,25,329	12,593	3,37,922
<b>Percentage variation</b>	<b>9.9</b>	<b>7.7</b>	<b>9.2</b>

**Table 2: IPC crimes committed against Women**

Sl. No	Year	Total IPC Crimes	Crimes against Women(IPC Crimes)	Percentage
1	2010	22,24,831	2,13,585	9.6%
2	2011	23,25,575	2,19,142	9.4%
3	2012	23,87,188	2,44,270	10.2%
4	2013	26,47,722	2,95,896	11.2%
5	2014*	28,51,563	3,25,327	11.4

**Why Women Empowerment?**

About Two thirds of the 774 million adult illiterates worldwide are women – the same proportion for the past 20 years and across most regions. This may be due to misinterpretation of religious teachings and more often due to narrow approach of people. Today the trend is changing and it is also the concern of UN in the light of Millennium Development Goal to empower women. Empowering women to participate fully in economic life across all sectors is essential to build stronger economies, achieve internationally

agreed goals for development and sustainability, and improve the quality of life for women, men, families and communities. The private sector is a key partner in efforts to advance gender equality and empower women. Developed through partnership between UN Women and United Nations Global Compact, the principles are designed to support companies in reviewing existing policies and practices or establish new ones to empower women. The key principles are- To establish high level corporate leadership for gender equality; Treat all women and men fairly at work respect and support human rights and non discrimination; Ensure health, safety and well being of all women and men workers; Promote education, training and professional development for women; Implement enterprise development, supply chain and marketing practices that empower women; Promote equality through community initiatives and advocacy; Measure and publicly report on progress to achieve gender equality.

**Constitutional Provisions for Empowerment of Women in India:** The Constitution of India not only grants equality to women but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women for neutralizing the cumulative socio economic, education and political disadvantages faced by them. Fundamental Rights, among others, ensure equality before the law and equal protection of law; prohibits discrimination against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth, and guarantee equality of opportunity to all citizens in matters relating to employment. Articles 14, 15, 15(3), 16, 39(a), 39(b), 39(c) and 42 of the Constitution are of specific importance in this regard. Indian Parliament has passed the Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993 for the proper implementation of Article 51-A. Indian Parliament over the years have taken significant steps for through legislations to achieve the goal of empowering the women in India. The significant among them are the Equal Remuneration Act, the Prevention of Immoral Traffic Act, the Sati (Widow Burning the rights of) Prevention Act, and the Dowry Prohibition Act etc. Apart from these, the 73rd and 74th Constitution (Amendment) Acts provided for 33% reservation for women in both Panchayath and Nagarpalika institutions as well as for the positions of chairpersons of these bodies. These two amendments removed the bottlenecks from the paths of women empowerment at the local level. In order to facilitate equal participation of women at the national and state level politics, the bill providing for 33% reservation of seats for women in national and States legislatures has been introduced in Parliament. Apart from this, in India, National Commission for Women had been established in 1990 to look into the women’s problem. NCW has engaged them to deal

with the cases relating to the violation of women's rights. They have also taken up the cudgels for women's right and have vociferously demanded a separate criminal code for women and enhanced punishment for offences against women. The proposal for creating a separate criminal code for women was designed to provide quick justice to the aggrieved women and speed up the conviction rate. However, this proposal failed to garner support among the government and have been shelved.

The Ministry for Women & Child Development was established as a department of the Ministry of Human Resource Development in the year 1985 to drive the holistic development of women and children in the country. In 2006 this department was given the status of a Ministry, with the powers to- Formulate plans, policies and programmes, enacts/ amends legislation, guiding and coordinating the efforts of both governmental and non-governmental organizations working in the field of Women and Child Development.

Additionally, the Ministry is also implementing the *Swayamsidha* programme, an integrated scheme for the empowerment of women at a total cost of Rs. 116.30 crores. Core to this programme will be the establishment of women's self-help groups which will empower women to have increased access to all kinds of resources that they are denied, in addition to increasing their awareness and skills. This programme will benefit about 9, 30,000 women with the setting up of 53,000 self-help groups, 26,500 village societies and 650 block societies

#### **Hindrance to Women Empowerment**

Although today, women have acquired a level of financial and political autonomy and consciousness about their rights, yet they experience helplessness in bringing about basic changes for eliminating gender inequalities from the society. The problems that were faced by women in the past are still faced today they are- Gender discrimination, lack of education, female infanticide, financial constraints, family responsibility, low mobility, low ability to bear risk, low need for achievement, social status, dowry, marriage, atrocities on women, domestic violence and sexual harassment both in domestic and work place. Often they are deprived of decision making power, freedom of movement, access to education and employment and exposure to media.

#### **Status of Women Empowerment**

The status of women empowerment cannot be visualized with single dimension rather a multidimensional assessment in terms of various components of women's life and their status would bring a clear conception. It has to be viewed in terms of education, health, employment and social status. The gender gap prepared by World Economic Forum 2015 shows the status of women in India.

**Table 3: Details of Gender Gap Index- 2015 in India**

Gender gap sub-indices	Rank	Score
<b>Economy</b>	139	0.383
<b>Education</b>	125	0.896
<b>Health</b>	143	0.942
<b>Politics</b>	9	0.433

The above table clearly depicts the status of low level of attainment of women in various field. With the third millennium development goal women education has received considerable support. It is centered towards promoting gender equality and empowering women: "Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005 and in all levels of education by no later than 2015". While India's progress in this front has been brave, there are quite a few corners that it needs to cut before it can be called as being truly revolutionary in its quest for understanding what women empowerment is? As United Nation Development Programme (UNDP) says- "India missed the 2005 deadline of eliminating gender disparity in primary and secondary education. However, the country has made progress and the Gender Parity Index (GPI) for Gross Enrolment Ratios (GER) in primary and secondary education has risen. But with respect to political empowerment is concerned in spite of 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> constitution amendments there are not given opportunities in politics.

**Challenges to Women Empowerment:** There are several constraints that check the process of women empowerment in India. Social norms and family structure in developing countries like India, manifests and perpetuate the subordinate status of women. Women often internalize the traditional concept of their role as natural thus inflicting an injustice upon them. Poverty is the reality of life for the vast majority women in India. It is also one of the factors that pose challenge in realizing women's empowerment. There are several challenges that are plaguing the issues of women's right in India. Targeting these issues will directly benefit the empowerment of women in India

**Education:** While the country has grown from leaps and bounds since independence where education is concerned. The gap between women and men is severe. While 82.14% of adult men are educated, only 65.46% of adult women are known to be literate in India. The gender bias is in higher education, specialized professional trainings which hit women very hard in employment and attaining top leadership in any field.

**Poverty:** Poverty is considered the greatest threat to peace in the world, and eradication of poverty should be a national goal as important as the eradication of illiteracy. Due to this, women are exploited as domestic helps.

**Health and Safety:** The health and safety concerns of women are paramount for the wellbeing of a country and are an important factor in gauging the empowerment of women in a country. However there are alarming concerns where maternal healthcare is concerned. According to the UN report, maternal deaths have witnessed 45 per cent drop globally since 1990 — from 5.2 lakh in 1990 to 2.89 lakh in 2013. Despite India progressing noticeably in curbing the maternal mortality rate (MMR), 65 per cent drop reported since 1990. The country is lagging behind the UN-mandated Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of bringing a 75 per cent decline in the MMR till 2015.

**Professional Inequality:** This inequality is practiced in employment and promotions. Women face countless handicaps in male customized and dominated environs in Government Offices and Private enterprises. Sexual harassment at work place poses a big threat to development of women.

**Household Inequality:** Household relations show gender bias in infinitesimally small but significant manners all across the globe, more so, in India e.g. sharing burden of housework, childcare and menial works by so called division of work.

**Findings and Suggestions:** Globalization, Liberalization and other Socio - Economic forces have given some respite to a large proportion of the population. However, there are still quite a few areas where women empowerment in India is largely lacking. There needs to be a sea – change in the mind set of the people in the country. Not just the women

themselves, but the men have to wake up to wake up to a world that is moving towards equality and equity. It is better that this is embraced earlier than later for our own good. There are several Government programmes and NGOs in the Country, but there is still a wide gap that exists between those under protection and those not. Poverty and illiteracy add to these complications, The Empowerment of Women begins with a guarantee of their health and safety. Adopting definite social and economic policies with a view of total development of women and to make them realize that they have the potential to be strong human beings is the need of the hour.

The idea of self reliant independent women taking independent decisions of her life can be achieved only by educating women that will help them in achieving economic independence, as well as knowledge and awareness about their rights. Special emphasis must be provided in educating women on the legal and Human rights provided to them by the constitution. The women's organizations must try to empower women by changing the attitudes of the society towards the harmful traditional practices. One of the most vital tasks of the various women organizations and NGOs is to help women in rebuilding their lives and confidence. Curriculum reforms that works towards eliminating the gender stereotype in schools is an important step in achieving gender equality. Strict implementation of Programmes and Acts should be there to curb the mal-practices prevalent in the society.

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