

Overview of Women Empowerment in India

¹Ujjal Kumar De & ²Dr. Shailendra Kumar Sharma

¹Research Scholar, Dept of Political Science, Sri Satya Sai University of Technology & Medical Sciences, Sehore, MP (India)

²Research Guide, Sri Satya Sai University of Technology & Medical Sciences, Sehore, MP (India)

ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 15 April 2019

Keywords

Empowerment, Women, Multidimensional, National Policy

ABSTRACT

Empowerment of women is a socio-political ideal, encompassing notions of dignity and equality, envisioned in relation to the wider framework of women's rights. It is a process of gaining control over self, over resources and over existing societal perceptions and attitudes and would be achieved only when an improvement in the 'condition' of women is accompanied by an advancement in their 'position' by enlarging the economic, social and political freedoms and choices available to them. Women's empowerment especially refers to the collective action by the deprived and oppressed women to overcome the obstacles of structural inequality, which previously caused their disadvantaged position. It is a continuous, multidimensional mechanism through which women can understand their ability and overcome obstacles. On the empowerment of women, emphasis is sometimes placed on women's decision-making roles, their economic self-reliance, their legal rights to equal treatment, their right to inheritance and protection from all forms of discrimination. The idea of empowerment is therefore conceived as an aid to help women contribute equally with men and significantly reduce the gender gap. Empowerment would enable women to perform certain social roles, which they could not perform without it.

1. Introduction

The concept of empowerment also implies a power to participate in the decision-making process in all aspects of society, which include socio-political, economic and cultural aspects of the society.

Empowerment is the trend of the 1990s and has become the most common growth phenomena, especially with regard to women. Empowerment is a crucial response to many social problems, such as high population development, environmental degradation, etc. It is defined as "giving power to "creating power within" and "enabling", which is a multi-dimensional process that enables individuals and groups in all spheres of life to become aware of their full identity and power.

Empowerment of women is a socio-political ideal, encompassing notions of dignity and equality, envisioned in relation to the wider framework of women's rights. It is a process of gaining control over self, over resources and over existing societal perceptions and attitudes and would be achieved only when an improvement in the 'condition' of women is accompanied by an advancement in their 'position' by enlarging the economic, social and political freedoms and choices available to them.

Women's empowerment especially refers to the collective action by the deprived and oppressed women to overcome the obstacles of structural inequality, which previously caused their disadvantaged position. It is a continuous, multidimensional mechanism through which women can understand their ability and overcome obstacles. On the empowerment of women, emphasis is sometimes placed on women's decision-making roles, their economic self-reliance, their legal rights to equal treatment, their right to inheritance and protection from all

forms of discrimination. The idea of empowerment is therefore conceived as an aid to help women contribute equally with men and significantly reduce the gender gap. Empowerment would enable women to perform certain social roles, which they could not perform without it.

Empowerment of women and equality between men and women are considered as prerequisite for achieving women's political, social, economic and cultural goals. It empowers women both in material and in psychological terms. It is presumed that empowerment of women would not only strengthen the political movements earlier dominated by men, but would provide new energy, insights, leadership, and strategies to women.

2. National policy on women

Women's development is one of the central issues in any country in the world's economic development process. India had a glorious tradition of recognizing the importance of women which was informed and realized through the contribution of various planners, writers and social reformers. Over the last few centuries, women's position in India has been subject to many major changes from a largely unknown role in ancient times to the introduction of equal rights.

The Government of India observes three dimensional strategies for development of women, namely Social empowerment, Economic empowerment and Gender justice and has made development of women as one of the principal objectives of its Five-Year Plans.

Table 1.1 Key Development Paradigms during Five Year Plans on Women

S.No.	Five Year Plans	Key Development Paradigms on Women
1	First Plan (1951-56)	Set up the Central Social Welfare Board in 1953 to promote welfare work through voluntary organizations, charitable trusts etc.,
2	Second Plan (1956-61)	Supported the development of Mahila Mandals to work at the grassroots.
3	Third, Fourth & Interim plans (1961-74)	Had provisions for women's education, pre-natal and health services to child and mothers, supplementary feeding for children, nursing and other health care programmes.
4	Fifth Plan (1974-78)	A major shift in the approach towards women from welfare to development.
5	Sixth Plan (1980-85)	Accepted women's devolvement as a separate economic agenda. Took a multi-disciplinary approach with a three pronged thrust on health, education and employment.
6	Seventh Plan (1985-90)	Had the objective of bringing women into the mainstream of national development.
7	Eighth Plan (1992-97)	Saw a paradigm shift from development to empowerment and benefits to women in the core sectors of education, health and empowerment. Outlay for women rose from Rs.4 Crores in the First Plan to Rs.2, 000 crore in the Eighth.
8	Ninth Plan (1997-2002)	Had empowerment of women as its strategic objective. Accepted the concept of a women's component plan to assure at least 30% of funds/benefits from all development sectors to flow to women.
9	Tenth Plan (2002-07)	Suggested specific strategies, policies and programmes for the empowerment of women.
10	Eleventh Plan (2007-12)	Rapid and inclusive growth, empowerment through education and skill development, reduction of gender inequality, and environmental sustainability.
11	Twelfth Plan (2012-17)	"Faster, sustainable and more inclusive growth" in women empowerment.

3. Women development and the five-year plans:

The idea of women's development was primarily welfare-oriented in the First Five Year Program (1951-56). A variety of welfare initiatives were implemented by the Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB) formed in 1953 through the voluntary sector. Women were organized into Mahila Mandals in the Second Five Year Plan (1956-61) to act as focal points at grass root levels for women's development. Women's training was given high importance by the Second, Fourth and Other Interim Plans (1961-74). Measures have also been implemented to enhance maternal and child health programs, increased feeding for infants and breastfeeding and expectant mothers. There was a shift in women's approach to development from 'welfare' to 'development' in the Fifth Plan (1974-78). The new approach was aimed at integrating welfare with services for development. The Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-85) was a milestone in women's development history as it was recognised as one of the strategic fields included for the first time in the history of urban management in the Sixth Five Year Plan Report as a separate section. The Sixth Plan embraced a multi-disciplinary strategy with a three-pronged focus on health, employment, and work. The empowerment projects for women began in the Seventh Plan (1985-90) with the primary goal of raising their economic and social status and getting them into the forefront of national development. An important step in this direction was to recognise / promote 'benefit-oriented services' for women in various sectors of growth that provide direct benefits to women. The Eighth Five Year Plan (1992-97), launched in 1992, promised to guarantee that women were not bypassed by the welfare of development from various sectors and special programs were incorporated to complement the general development programmes. Therefore, the distribution of benefits to women was tracked with greater diligence in the three key sectors of education, health and employment Women had to be able to function in the development process as equal partners and members. This approach to the Eighth Plan

represents another change from women's 'growth' to 'empowerment'. To meet both the growing and challenging needs of women and children, over the last four developmental decades there has been a gradual increase in the outlays of the plan. In the Eight Five Year Plan (1992-97), the outlay of Rs.4 crore in the First Plan (1951-56) rose to Rs.2000 crore.

Empowering women has promoted socio-economic change and growth has become one of the Ninth Plan (1997-2002)'s nine main priorities. The plan was specifically designed to ensure that benefits flow to women from all fields of general development and emphasized on

- (i) Reservation of at least 1/3rd seats for women in legislative bodies of parliament and government;
- (ii) Convergence of existing services, resources, infrastructure and personnel in specific sectors for women and related sectors for women;
- (iii) Adoption of a special strategy of 'Women's Component Plan' to ensure that not less than 30% of funds/benefits flow to women from other developmental sectors;
- (iv) Organizing women into Self-Help Groups and thus marking the beginning of a major process of empowering women;
- (v) High priority to reproductive child health care;
- (vi) Universalizing the on-going supplementary feeding programme;
- (vii) Ensuring easy and equal access to education for women and girls;
- (viii) Elimination of gender bias in all educational programmes;
- (ix) Free education for girls up to college level, including professional courses;
- (x) Promoting skill development amongst women in modern upcoming trades etc.,

A number of special initiatives have been taken during the

Ninth Plan, including the launch of an externally aided Swashakti scheme (1998) for the socio-economic empowerment of women through self-reliant self-help groups; the establishment of Stree Shakti Puraskar (1999); the establishment of a task force under the chairmanship of the Deputy Chairperson, Planning Commission, to review existing women - specific and women-related legislations (2000); adoption of National Policy on Empowerment of Women (2001), celebration of the year 2001 as Women's Empowerment Year; recasting of Indira Mahila Yojana as Swayamsidha (2001); launching of Swadhar (2001) and to extend rehabilitation services for women in difficult circumstances etc. The Tenth Five Year Plan (2002-2007) aimed at empowerment of women as agents of social change and development. To this end, a sector-specific 3-fold strategy was adopted on the basis of the National Women's Empowerment Policy (2001).

In the light of the planning of the 11th Five Year Plan (2007-12), the Planning Commission created the Steering Committee on Women's Empowerment and Children's Growth, headed by Dr Syeda Hameed, Member of the Planning Commission, with certain terms of reference. The country's female population rose marginally from 48.10 per cent of the total population in 1991 to 48.30 per cent of the total population in 2001. In absolute numbers, this implies an increase by 89.4 million, i.e. from 407.10 million in 1991 to 496.00 million in 2001. The growth rate of the female population for the 1991-2001 decade was 23.08, slightly higher than the male.

The major schemes implemented during the plan period were: Swayam Sidha, Working Women's hostels, Rashtriya Mahila Kosh, Central Social Welfare Board and National Commission for Women. The plan proposed to: create an independent high-level committee on self-help groups and women's status, analyze SHG-related policies and programs, make recommendations on the vision driving SHG initiatives in terms of empowerment and poverty alleviation, build and monitor capable gender equality and equity metrics, assess the position of funding agencies including government agencies establishment of micro finance institutions etc.

The Twelfth Plan (2012-17) was entitled as "Faster, Sustainable and More Inclusive growth". In previous plans, there was not much more attention towards women's cause. It is widely believed that men enjoy all the power, position and privileges while women were treated as second rate and a lower human species. The Government of India had decided for the growth rate at 8.2% but the National Development Council (NDC) on 27th December, 2012, approved 8% growth rate for the 12th Five Year Plan. The Planning Commission is pushing for special dispensation under various government schemes in the 12th Five Year Plan, for single women, particularly those who are single by choice.

4. Government Programmes for Women Empowerment

The Government of India has been implementing various programmes through its different departments to bring about women's development and their empowerment. Due to lack of a uniform and comprehensive policy with a unified vision, each department has interpreted and executed different programmes with no integration and the result was unattainment and failure of implied objectives. The Social Welfare Department focused on attaining women development and offered various

scholarships and pensions to the vulnerable groups for their upliftment. The Department of Rural Development focused on the concept of NGOs for the development of rural infrastructure and use of women for economic self-reliance. The Agriculture Department harnessed efforts on sustainable agriculture development by enabling women to possess agricultural land and exposure to the use of technology in all agricultural activities. The Horticulture Department aimed at enhancing the skills of women in the production, preservation and processing of vegetables and fruits to make them economically self-reliant. The Dairy Department encouraged women in animal husbandry and dairying activities to improve their economic status. The Education Department formulated its policies for encouraging girl child education, extended scholarships, established residential schools and provided educational loans to pursue higher studies. The Adult Education programme of the Education Department was aimed to increase women literacy rate. Though there have been number of programmes and schemes initiated by different departments, confusion prevailed in selecting the helpless downtrodden and these eligible for support from the government.

Women Empowerment Through SHGs

Empowering women via self-help groups would bring benefits not only to the individual women's and women's groups, but also to the families and the community as a whole through collective development action. These groups have a common perception of need and impulse towards collective action. Empowering women is not only a way to meet their economic needs, but also through more comprehensive social development. The idea of SHG serves the principle "by the women, of the women and for the women". The origin of SHG is from the brain child of Gramin Bank of Bangladesh, which was founded by the economist, Nobel laureate Prof. Mohammed Yunus of Chittagong University in the year 1975. This was exclusively established for the poor.

A Self - Help Group is a tiny economically homogeneous affinity community of rural poor people who are voluntarily prepared to donate to a shared fund to be lent to their leaders through group decision, acting for the unity of the collective, self-help groups, education, social and economic prosperity in the form of democratic functioning. The movement of the Self Help Group has become a silent revolution in many parts of the world within a short span of the rural credit delivery system. About 53 developing countries, including India, have been reported to take up this on a large scale. In 1997, Washington's World Micro Credit Summit converged to address the urgent problem of poverty by using micro-credit as a method to motivate the weakest areas. To reach 100 million of the world's poorest families by 2005, a global movement was launched.

Women Empowerment and Political Empowerment

Women's empowerment is an important condition for any society's socio-economic development. While women make up one half of the population, they continue to be subjugated in a socio-economic and political situation. Women fought for self-respect and autonomy. Since the mid-1980s due to criticism of their marginalized position and suffering by women themselves across various campaigns by youth, the topic of 'women empowerment' has come into focus. According to Bina Agarwal (2000), empowerment is a 'cycle' which strengthens the

capacity of disadvantaged (powerless) individuals and groups to question and alter (in their favor) existing power structures which put them in subordinate financial, social and political roles. '.

Bargava and Subha (2002), described political independence as the ability to influence decision-making, preparation, execution, and assessment through their incorporation into the political system. This means political participation which involves voting rights, elections, initiatives, party membership and involvement in all levels of political service which ultimately affects decisions that lead to democratic autonomy.

Political empowerment refers to the process by which women gain equal respect on a par with men to engage in the development process of community as a collaborator in human dignity through the political institutions. Political empowerment applies to a specific role for women in policy making and in shaping decision-making through incorporating them into the political system.

Since independence, Indian women have had little presence in institutional politics. Over the past two decades, there has been more concern about increasing the participation of women in political institutions, leading to empowerment. Affirmative action has been accepted as a means of empowerment in politics. Leadership is necessary not just to govern but to change the nature of governance. Unfortunately affirmative action and women participation have failed to move beyond local government in India.

History of Political Participation of Women in India

The root to the participation of women in politics can be traced back to 19th century Reform Movement. The social reforms and educational programs initiated by different social reformers in the early 19th century tackled the societal problems that are prevalent in society. The social reform movement has been regarded as a key to the intellectual processes that went into the making of modern India. They felt that by educating women and bringing in progressive legislation, social change could be implemented. Social evils can be eradicated by raising awareness and sensitizing people to women's injustice.

Social reformers such as Rajaram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Mahadeva Govinda Ranade, Behramji Malabari raised their voices against prevailing practices and undermining women's social customs. Their energies are focused on issues that adversely affect women's lives such as sati tradition, female infanticide, widow's plight, child marriage, polygamy, etc. Rajaram Mohan Roy championed the ban on the practice of sati. The campaign resulted in the government resolution of 1829, banning the practice of sati. Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar took up the cause of widows and started a

movement for widow remarriage in 1850s. It resulted in Hindu Widow Remarriage Act of 1856. But this act denied them the right to their husband's and family's property. It met with a strong opposition from Bengali orthodoxy (Sinha Niroj, 2000).

Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar fought against polygamy and encouraged women's education. Pandith Ramabai, Manorama Majumdar, Sarala Devi Goshal founded Bharath Shree Mahamandal for the education of women. Swama Kumari Devi founded women's organization called Sakthi Samiti in 1886 for widows. Behranje Malabari started campaigned against child marriage and nationwide debate over Age of Consent Bill. It met with strong opposition from the orthodox Hindus. The attack was spearheaded by Lokmanya Tilak, who defied the legislation as an attack on religion. The orthodox Hindus were connecting the issue of reform and religion. They wanted all reforms within the framework of Hinduism. So the movement was almost totally overwhelmed by Hindu revivalism by the end of the 19th century.

The new revivalism was embodied in powerful organizations such as Dayanand Saraswati's Arya Samaj (1875), Vivekananda's Ramkrishna Mission (1897) and Annie Besant's Madras Hindu Association (1904). The new organizations attacked the reformers but supported some reforms of the Hindu society. They did not incorporate a good deal of the programmes of reformers such as educating women, raising the age of marriage, remarriage of child widows etc. but all this was to be done within the framework of Hinduism.

Nivedita Menon observes those movements, as well as the resistances to such reforms were decisively shaped by the colonial encounter. Prominent sections of the bourgeoisie had an intent to reform what the colonial discourse presented as primitive and barbaric aspects of the Hindu society, while the resistance came from revivalist nationalists who challenged the colonial interventions with Indian tradition (Menon Nivedita, 1999).

5. Conclusion:

Empowerment of women is essential for bright future in family, society and country. For awakening the people, it is required to awaken the women and if a woman has been awakened then the whole nation and family gets awakened with her. The root to the participation of women in politics can be traced back to 19th century Reform Movement. The social reforms and educational programs initiated by our country in the early 19th century is a significant step towards empowering women.

References

1. Gurumoorthy T.R., "Self Help Groups Empower Rural Women", Kurukshehra, Vol.48, No.5, Feb 2000.
2. Kabeer, N. (1999), "The Conditions and Consequences of Choice: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment", Discussion Paper, No. 108, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, Geneva.
3. Laxminarayanan Ramanathan (2011), "Socio-Economic impact of SHG- Bank Linkage on Members: An Assessment", Southern Economist, March 2011.
4. Munner Sultana (2005), "Women Empowerment Through Self Help Groups with Reference to Vikarabad Mandal of Ranga Reddy District of Andhra Pradesh", Sedme, Vol. 32, No. 3, September.
5. Rajapriya, M. "Empowerment of Women through Self Help

- Groups", *Social Welfare*, Vol.55, No.6, 2008. P.10.
6. Raghavan .V. P. (2009) Micro-Credit and Empowerment: A Study of Kudumbashree Projects in Kerala, India. *Journal of Rural Development*, 28 (4), pp. 469 - 484.
 7. Subha K., Bargava B.S., "Feminism and Political Empowerment of Women at the Grass -Root. The Karnataka Experience", *South Asian Journal of Socio -Political Studies*, Vol. 1, No.2, June Dec, 2000.
 8. Sanjay Kanti Das "Best Practices of Self Help Groups and Women Empowerment: A Case of Barak Valley of Assam" *Far East Journal of Psychology and Business* Vol. 7 No. 2 May 2012.
 9. Vigneshwara Swamy P. M. (2006), "Self Help Groups and Women Empowerment", *Journal of Development and Social Change*, Vol. 3, No. 3 & 4, April-June and July-September.