



Empowerment of Women at The Grassroots in India : Challenges and Opportunities

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In recent years, good deals of attentions have been given on the question of women human rights in India and throughout the world. Human rights to both men and women include access to life, liberty, equality, food, shelter, work, leisure, education, participation in politics and equitable distribution of power in society. But gender discrimination, specifically, gender discrimination against women has become the greatest challenge against and the biggest obstacle in the way of women's enjoyment of human rights. It is well accepted by all that women are denied equal socio-economic, civil and political rights to that of men. Human rights are not a domain of man alone, they cover the entire Mankind, constitution and the laws also make provisions for the protection of rights equally to both men and women, but gender equality is still a far cry for the women in our patriarchal society which is characterized by exclusive male dominance by way of male control of female sexuality, fertility, mobility and productivity. The women faces non acceptance in such a system and is subjected to discrimination, control, exploitation, oppression and violence within family and outside.

Contrary to all the claims of achievement in gender equality, the recent high profile cases of barbaric rapes and torture of women, including in the national capital region, clearly shows that injustice against women still exists at extreme levels. While Indian women have shown highest professional accomplishments, subjugating to just the roles of procreation and household chores is truly against the spirit of modern India. However, while the government has either failed to protect women's rights or has been very slow in responding to the issues of violations against women's rights, fortunately media and some societal groups has made several inroads in promoting women's rights and women empowerment through a variety of strategies and development platforms.

As far as historical perspective is concerned, status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millennium. In early Vedic period Women enjoyed equal status with men. Rigved & upnishads mention several names of women sages and seers notably Gargi & Maitrey. However later the status of women began to deteriorate approximately from 500 B.C., the situation worsened with invasion of Mughals and later on by European invaders. Some reformatory movements by Guru Nanak, Jainism, Raja Rammohan Rai, Ishwarchandra Vidya Sagar, Pandita Rama Bai and others did give some relief. It is not that Britishers didn't do anything for improving the condition of women. Some laws were enacted such as "Abolition of practice of Sati", Widow Remarriage Act 1856 etc.

During the independence movement, women were visible and active as nationalists, and as symbols of "Mother India". Gandhi, in particular, was instrumental in creating space for women through his non-violence (and some would argue feminized) mode of protest. Gandhi's legendary salt march initially excluded women, but due to demands from women nationalists he later realized the power of women organizers at the local level. His inclusion of women, however, was not located within a gender equality framework¹, but was a means to achieving a stronger and unified Indian state. The inclusion of women in the nationalist movement was also to debunk the British colonial assertion of "needing to save the poor, vulnerable women" of pre-independence India. As in many nationalist movements, women in India took part in the struggle, in turn propelling a women's rights movement². And, as seen historically in many post-colonial countries, the nationalist women's movement in India was confronted by the re-building of a patriarchal nationalist state. Women revolutionaries gave

way to their male counterparts who (as a result of Partition politics) created a strong, male, and Hindu "New India".

The real change came after independence. The Constitution Framers were very much conscious of the problem of women empowerment hence they ensured that the Principle of Gender Equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its preamble, fundamental duties and directive principles. Moreover the Constitution also empowers the states to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. Constitution of India guarantees equality to women (Article 14). There are other articles too which ensure rights of women e.g. no discrimination by the state [article15(1)] equality of opportunity (Article16) etc. Feminist activism picked up momentum in India during later 1970's. Later on many groups and societal groups have been working for the Empowerment of women. The first post-independence Lok Sabha (the People's Council or the Parliament) had 4.4% women. The period between the early 1940's and late 1970's saw an emergence of the Indian women's movement, but it was not until the 1980s that the women's movement gained real momentum. In 1976 the Committee on the status of Women in India was established and published a report recommending an increase in elected women at the grassroots level, which led to the introduction of the 33.3% reservation at the Panchayat level in 1988. It was only in 1993 that an amendment in the constitution made the proposed reservation at the Panchayat (village level governing councils) a reality³.

In the last two decades since the reservation for women in elected Panchayats was passed, many studies have been conducted to look at the impact of this policy. A survey conducted in 2008 yielded that women made up close to 50% of all the village councils across the India. The number of women representatives has certainly increased at the grassroots level; however, questions still remain regarding their decision-making power within the councils. A study in West Bengal and Rajasthan by the Institute of Management Studies (Calcutta) and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) found that where women Panchayat members were active, there were more robust programs on water, irrigation, and infrastructure. The study conclusively states that in Panchayats where women were present policies were more beneficial to the community than in Panchayats where women were absent. A study by The Accountability Initiative also states that in Panchayats with female presidents, the participation of women in the larger council rose close to 3% in one year⁴. The reason for the increase in women's participation is correlated to two possible factors: first, women representatives exemplified new possibilities for change; and second, women leaders took up issues that would have a positive impact on the community as a whole.

Women empowerment, in concept and practice, is complex due to various dimensions involved in it. There are myriad explanations and interpretations on what constitute the process of women empowerment. However, it is commonly accepted that women empowerment incorporates a few key elements including awareness, autonomy, self-reliance, rights and engagement in decision-making process, capacity building, and certain level of power.

The complexities of politics in India are embedded in class, caste, and religious identities. An analysis by International Idea of women in the Indian Parliament between 1991 and 1996 found that among the small number of women Parliamentarians, a disproportionate number represented the Brahmin caste (the higher caste in the Hindu caste system). Most local governments remain largely patriarchal

and caste-based institutions, hindering inclusive governance. Furthermore, social mobility remains a privilege of members of higher classes and caste, although this is dramatically changing as a result of reservations for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) in politics and education. For women politicians, class, age, and caste all have significant impact in their political lives. India is one of the few countries in the world that has elected a woman leader. Indira Gandhi was among the very few women leaders in the world during her time in office. However, her role as the Prime Minister was not seen as a win for the women's movement in India. She was the granddaughter of Jawaharlal Nehru and represented the political dynasty of her family. In 2007 India elected its first female President, Ms. Pratibha Patil. While the President holds a mostly ceremonial role in Indian politics, Ms. Patil's election was deemed a symbolic move towards a more equitable representation of women at the highest levels of government. Although representation of women and members of the lower castes in Indian politics is rapidly changing, complexities of caste politics continue to govern representation.

The empowerment of women is located within the discourse and agenda of gender equality and is increasingly being taken in the agendas of international development organizations, perhaps more as a means to achieve gender equality than as an end in itself. In line with most theorists on empowerment the one has to view empowerment as taking place on different levels and that change on all levels is necessary if the empowerment of women is really to occur. We have to relate empowerment at three levels: empowerment on the individual, group, and societal/ community- level and the interaction between these. The individual level deals with individual women's abilities to take control over their lives, their perceptions about their own value and abilities, their abilities to identify a goal and work towards this goal. The group level deals with the collective action and sense of agency that women experience together, in a group. The societal level deals with the permissiveness of the political and social climate, the societal norms and the public discourse on what is possible and impossible for women to do, how women should behave etc.

The real impetus for this movement was gained when under the Prime minister ship of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, a scheme known as Indira Mahila Yojana was launched, UNDP also incorporated issues of women up-liftment as Primary objective. Various Schemes were later on launched for the empowerment of women such as Rashtriya Mahila Kosh, Mahila Samridhi Yojana, Self help groups at Panchayat level and many more. The establishment of National Women's Commission and State Women's Commissions were important milestones in the direction of Women Empowerment in India. The National Policy for the Empowerment of women (2001) was an important step taken by the Government of the time for accelerating the pace of women empowerment. The policy was aimed at ensuring women empowerment through positive economic and social policies for the full development of women². So, they could realize their full potential. The policy assured equal access to women to health care, quality education, participation and decision making in Social, Political and Economical life of the nation. The National Policy also aims at strengthening legal system for eliminating discrimination against Women. It also visualizes strengthening partnership with Civil Society, particularly Women's organizations. States have also taken various measures for empowerment of women.

Why is there still a Need For Women Empowerment ? In spite of the various measures taken up by the government after Independence and even during British rule the Women haven't been fully empowered. We may be proud of women in India occupying highest offices of President, Prime Minister, Lok Sabha Speaker, Leader of the Opposition or women like Ms. Chandra Kochar occupying highest positions in the Corporate Sector but the fact remains that we still witness dowry deaths, domestic violence and exploitation of women. The female feticide is not an uncommon phenomenon. The male female ratio though improved over last few years is still far from satisfactory. It is 940 women per 1000 men for India in some states it is as much lower as 877. The female literacy rate is also lower than the male literacy rate. The ground reality is deprivation and exploitation of women specially women from rural areas and those belonging to deprived sectors of the society. The Urban elite class women have no doubt been benefitted by the efforts of women empowerment. In spite of reservation being granted to women in Panchayat elections after 73rd and

74th Constitution amendment, in many Panchayats the male Chauvinism does not allow them to function independently⁶.

Under the social empowerment of women steps needs to be taken to improve the health status of women, reduce maternal mortality especially in the areas which do not have good medical facilities. A programme for checking the spread of sexually transmitted diseases like HIV / AIDS and infections / communicable diseases like T.B. need to be launched. Women face high risk of malnutrition hence focused attention would have to be given to meet the nutritional needs of women at all stages of their life cycle.

The problem in the country is serious about the women belonging to disadvantaged groups. They are the most exploited lot. The Social activist should keep a vigil on the atrocities committed on women belonging to weaker sections and help them to fight the legal battle for obtaining justice. Schemes need to be introduced for helping women who are victims of marital violence, who are deserted and those engaged in sex professions.

Awareness programmes need to be organised for creating awareness among women especially belonging to weaker sections about their rights. Government has to be vigilant for ensuring that there is no discrimination against the girl child and her rights are protected. The social stigma like child marriage, female feticide, child abuse and child prostitution must be eradicated immediately.

Education is a powerful tool of social transformation. Hence, education for Women has to be paid special attention⁷. Greater access for women to education must be ensured in the educational system. Gender sensitivity must be developed. A watch has to be kept on dropout rate of girls and corrective measures should be taken to check the dropout rates.

Governmental Organizations are formal agencies working for the empowerment of women. But this work requires multidimensional approach and hence a large number of voluntary organizations have gained increased attention in the field from grassroots level to national & international level⁸. Their role is so impressive because they work with missionary zeal and commitment. The working style of grassroots agencies is open, transparent and personal.

So, they are more effective in this direction. They organize seminars, conferences and workshops for the awakening of the masses. Their mass appeal – style contributes to a better understanding of women's rights and of the means to ensure the enjoyment of those rights and the elimination of discrimination. They prepare urban and rural uneducated women for self – employment, which is vital for the economic empowerment of the women. In short, all these programs and functions of NGO's contribute towards the realization of sustainable community development and hence women empowerment.

Conclusion

Empowerment and advancement of women at the grassroots in India, including the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief, thus contributing to the moral, ethical, spiritual and intellectual needs of women and men, individually or in community with others and thereby guaranteeing them the possibility of realizing their full potential in society and shaping their lives in accordance with their own aspirations. Governments can provide an enabling environment to make this possible. Women's organizations need the space and resources to bring about the societal transformations that remove the constraints, fulfill the potential, and guarantee the rights of women in India. The recommendations made in this report can pave the way toward that future. The concept of empowerment is related to gender equality but distinct from it. The core of empowerment lies in the ability of a woman to control her own destiny. Efforts by the Governments are on to ensure gender equality but Government initiatives alone would not be sufficient to achieve this goal. Society must take initiative to create a climate in which there is no gender discrimination and Women have full opportunities of Self decision making and participating in the Social, Political and Economic life of the Country with a sense of equality. This implies that to be empowered women must not only have equal capabilities (such as education and health) and equal access to resources and opportunities (such as land and employment), they must also have the agency to use those rights, ca-

pabilities, resources, and opportunities to make strategic choices and decisions (such as are provided through leadership opportunities and participation in political institutions). And to exercise agency, women must live without the fear of coercion and violence.

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