



Women Empowerment in India: an Overview

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Women Empowerment, Society, Indian, Gender

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ABSTRACT *Women empowerment is a multi-dimensional approach and covers socio-cultural, economic, political and personal aspects. The concept of women empowerment is the outcome of important critiques generated by the women's movement, particularly by feminists. They clearly state that women's empowerment requires the challenging of patriarchal power relations that result in women having less control over material assets and intellectual resources. The empowerment of women is an active multi-dimensional process which indicates towards a society where women have to realize their gender identity and status in all spheres of life. The active participation of women in social, cultural, economical, and political and in almost every field is required for women empowerment in our society. Women's empowerment is the process by which women negotiate a more equitable distribution of power, a greater space in the critical decision making process in the family, in the community and the economic and political life.*

The standard of a society rises and falls in correlation with the rises and falls in the status of women. In order to all round development of a society several social movements have been occurred and from which the term 'women empowerment' emerged with the motto to raise the status of women. Social scientists have been opined that the all round development and harmonious growth of a society, state or country would be possible only when the position of women are enhanced and they are considered equal partners with men. The scholars define empowerment as comprising increased power in the social, economical, political and psychological realms and consider. The term empowerment has come to mean many different aspects to actors in the field of development. The term empowerment appears in the language of among other, neomarxists, feminists and their world grass root, groups indicating its broad utility as a concept. In general empowerment refers to increasing social, political, educational gender or economic strength of individual or communities. Empowerment can be considered a change in the context of woman or man's life. That enables her/him increased capacity to lead a fulfilling human life characterized by external qualities such as health, mobility, education and awareness status in the family participation in decision making and level of material security as well as external qualities such as self awareness and self confidence.

Women empowerment is a holistic concept and can be called as gender empowerment. Gender equality and social participation are the key constituents in ensuring the empowerment of women. The development or progress of a group, community, race and nation depends on the policies and its implementations that adopt the notion of women empowerment. The approach of women empowerment commonly covers social, cultural, economic, political, educational, psychological and personal aspects. In many countries of world women are burdened with gender inequalities as a result of the many social, cultural and economic discriminatory practices. This proved the necessity of women empowerment to eradicate the vast difference between the idealized concept of women and the practical life situation in which women find them.

The status of women Indian society has consequently always changed from time to time. The status of women in ancient India was based on liberty, equality, equality and cooperation, but in the medieval India, the position of women was very much lowered and in modern India the status of women is almost the same as it was in the medieval period. Today in Indian society women have been suffering gender bias and

also facing much cruelty and exploitation due to prevalence of several social factors such as illiteracy, dowry, female feticide, rape, widowhood, sexual harassment, child marriage, domestic violence and prostitution etc. as a result of which women empowerment now-a-days a major issue in entire India.

In Indian contemporary society it can be observed that Indian women do not take a major place in much of the literature on social inclusion or empowerment. Women in India both in urban life and rural life have been facing gender discrimination in family life as well as in socioeconomic national affairs. Social scientist have arrived that equal status and equal participation of women in decision making at all levels is highly essential in Indian society. In India gender inequality is still a part of our male dominated society. The traditional mentalities of Indian assume that the place of women in a family is mainly concentrated to the household activities like household work and rearing of children for which women in general are simply being disregarded in our society. Unfortunately women have been treated by men as second rate citizen in our country. The need for women's empowerment arises from the subordinate position they have been accorded for a long time.

The process of women empowerment requires equal and active share for women has to deal with the burden of ideas and values which are passed on to women as part of their socialization process from their very childhood. Women's empowerment indicates power and relationship in society intertwined with gender, race, culture, race and history. The process of empowerment includes mobilizing women to reduce the gender gap in family as well as in community. One of the major aspects of women empowerment is to change the attitude of entire society in every field towards women. Unless the members of a society change the basic social attitude which cultivate gender inequality and gender discrimination, the women empowerment cannot be achieved in reality.

Empowerment has been used to represent a wide range of concepts. By empowerment of women in contemporary society is generally meant that the conferment of equal status in all issues related to family well-being and socio-economic as well as cultural affairs, providing for participation in decision making in all such matters. Commonly in Indian society women have never been allowed to think for their status or position or to make their own choices except in unusual circumstances when a male decision maker has been absent. The motto of women empowerment is to inspire women with

the courage to break free from the barriers of limiting belief patterns and societal or religious conditioning that have traditionally kept women suppressed and unable to see their true beauty and power. Empowerment related with the condition and position of women in a family, community or society. So, one of the major aspects of women empowerment in India is to change the age old conservative attitude of society towards women in contemporary life. The continuity of several changes in socio-economic and psycho-cultural aspects of human living has influenced the status or position of women in a society but numerous issues still exist in all areas of life, ranging from the cultural, political to the economic. Taking women's empowerment seriously means putting gender equality at the center of the human development equation.

The position of women in a society is the index of the standard of its social organization. In India there were distinct stages of rise and fall in the position of women. During ancient period the women were given an equal status along with men in almost every field of life. In early Vedic period the women received higher education and participated in the discussion of political and philosophical nature with male scholars. The Vedas, the Upanishads, the Epics and the Puranas mentioned several names of the lady scholars, philosophers, poets in ancient India. Gargi and Maitreyi were leading philosophers of early Vedic age. In Rig Veda the wife has been blessed to live as a queen in the house of her husband. The word "Dampati" so often used in the Vedic texts, the term meant "two joint owners of the household". No man was allowed to perform religious duties without a wife. Thus the position of women in ancient Vedic age was based on liberty, equality and cooperation.

The position of women gradually declined in Post-Vedic period as well as in medieval India. In course of time, the girls were denied of formal education. The marriageable age of girls came down to 8 or 10 years, which increased the number of widows. The ancient Indian ideal of the equality of male and female was finished and women were considered to be slaves of men. In Buddhist and Muslim periods, the status of women was deteriorated even further. The 'Sati' and 'Purdah' system were practiced during the Muslim period.

The position women further declined during the British rule in India. Even about a century back the position of India was

almost the same as it was in the medieval period. The principles of Hindu social organization were formulated by mostly males who kept the women without equal rights in her social life. For centuries, the Hindu women tolerated all types of cruelties at the hands of males. The male made her a way of entertainment and put the entire domestic responsibility over her head. Ordinarily, the celebrations of the birth of a son are definitely more joyful than those of the birth of a daughter. The daughters were usually not given equal rights with the son in the matter of food, cloth, education etc. Generally, they often married without their consent. In the house of the husband all members of the family consider the daughter-in-law as a servant of the family, whose main duties includes to obey everybody, to get up earliest and to sleep late, to eat whatever remains after others have eaten and not to complain anything about anyone.

With the advent of women's education in India and the influence of the western countries, together with the efforts of social reformers of contemporary India after independence, the low status of women in Indian society started change slowly. After Indian independence, the constitution, makers and the national leaders not only recognized the unequal social position of women but saw to it that women would get equal rights with men. The concept of equality has been enshrined in the constitution of independent India.

The constitution of India guarantees for equality between men and women in article 15. It also prohibited any discrimination on the basis of sex. But still women remain bound by cultural, political and economic constraints that prevent them from attaining absolute equality with men.

The past three decades have witnessed a steadily increasing awareness of the need to empower women through measures to increase social, economic and political equality, and broader access to fundamental human rights, improvement in nutrition, basic health and education. Along with awareness of the subordinate status of women has come to the concept of gender as an overarching socio-cultural variable, seen in relation to other factors, such as race, class, age and ethnicity. Gender is not synonymous with women, nor is it a zero-sum game implying loss for men; rather, it refers to both women and men, and to their status, relative to each other.

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