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**SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL
DEVELOPMENT FOR INDIAN WOMEN (WITH
SPECIAL REFERENCE TO WOMEN
EMPOWERMENT)**

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Socio-Economic and Political Development for Indian Women (With Special Reference to Women Empowerment)

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Abstract – The Empowerment of women has become one of the most important Concerns of 21st century not only at national level but also at the international level. Efforts by the Govt. 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. Then only the Vedic verse यत्र नारी पूज्यन्ते रमन्ते तत्र देवता (Wherever Women is respected, God resides there) would come true.

Key Words:- Women, Status, Gender, Legal, Empowerment ,Crime, Education, Globalization.

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INTRODUCTION

In the history of human development, women have been as vital in the history making as men have been. In fact higher status for women vis-à-vis employment and work performed by them in a society is a significant indicator of a nation's overall progress. Undoubtedly, without the active participation of women in national activities, the social, economic or political progress of a country will deteriorate and become stagnant. But ironically and tragically, women employees in general, are not taken very seriously by their superiors, colleagues, or society at large. Having a career poses challenges for women due to their family responsibilities. Traditionally Indian women had been home makers but in the recent decades, proper education and better awareness, in addition to the ever increasing cost of living has made them to go out and choose careers. In a patriarchal society like India it is still believed that a man is the primary bread winner of his family. Although Indian women have started working outside their homes but still they have a long way to go both culturally, socially and economically, to bring in positive attitudinal changes in the mind-set of people.

It is generally perceived that gender bias against working women starts right from the stage of recruitment. Most of the Indian men are not ready to accept that women are capable enough to work side by side with men in all the sectors, other than in a few

limited ones like teaching, nursing and in clerical sectors. Their capabilities are generally underestimated as a result of which Indian women have a tendency to opt for less demanding jobs even if they are highly qualified. Women have the responsibilities to effectively manage their multiple roles in domestic as well as professional lives. Men generally do not offer any help in the households work. This makes the life of working women extremely stressful.

For centuries women were not treated equal to men in many ways. They were not allowed to own property, they did not have a Share in the property of their parents, they had no voting rights, and they had no freedom to choose their work or job and so on. Now that we have come out of those dark days of oppression of women there is a need for strong movement to fight for the rights of women and to ensure that they get all the rights which men have or in other words a movement for the Empowerment of Women. The present seminar has been planned with a view to discuss the various issues related to the Empowerment of Women and to suggest measures for achieving this end.

WOMEN IN INDIA

Now the women in India enjoy a unique status of equality with the men as per constitutional and legal provision. But the Indian women have come a long

way to achieve the present positions. First, gender inequality in India can be traced back to the historic days of Mahabharata when Draupadi was put on the dice by her husband as a commodity. History is a witness that a woman was made to dance both in private and public places to please the man. Secondly, in Indian society, a female was always dependent on male members of the family even last few years ago. Thirdly, a female was not allowed to speak with loud voice in the presence of elder members of her in-laws. In the family, every faults had gone to her and responsible. Forth, as a widow her dependence on a male member of the family still more increase. In many social activities she is not permitted to mix with other members of the family. Other hand, she has very little share in political, social and economic life of the society.

The early twenty century, it was rise of the National Movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi who was in favor of removing all the disabilities of women. At the same time, Raja Ram Mohan Rai, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and various other social reformers laid stress on women's education, prevention of child marriage, withdrawals of evil practice of sati, removal of polygamy etc. The National Movement and various reform movements paved the way for their liberations from the social evils and religious taboos. In this context, we may write about the Act of Sati (abolish) 1829, Hindu Widow Remarriage Act' 1856, the Child Restriction Act, 1929, Women Property Right Act, 1937 etc.

After independence of India, the constitution makers and the national leaders recognized the equal social position of women with men. The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 has determined the age for marriage, provided for monogamy and guardianship of the mother and permitted the dissolution of marriage under specific circumstances. Under the Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act, 1956, an unmarried women, widow or divorce of sound mind can also take child in adoption. Similarly, the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 says that any person who gives, takes, or abets the giving or taking of dowry shall be punished with imprisonment, which may extend to six months or fine up to Rs.5000/ or with both. The Constitution of India guarantees equality of sexes and in fact grants special favors to women. These can be found in three articles of the constitution. Article 14 says that the government shall not deny to any person equality before law or equal protection of the law. Article 15 declares that government shall not discriminate against any citizen on the ground of sex. Article 15 (3) makes a special provision enabling the state to make affirmative discriminations in favor of women. Article 42 directs the state to make provision for ensuring just and human conditions of work and maternity relief. Above all, the constitution regards a fundamental duty on every citizen through Articles 15 (A), (E) to renounce the practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

STATUS OF WOMEN

The origin of the Indian idea of appropriate female behavior can be traced to Manu in 200 BC: "*by a young girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independent, even in her own house*".

India is a multifaceted society where no generalization could apply to the nation's various regional, religious, social and economic groups. Nevertheless certain broad circumstances in which Indian women live affect the way they participate in the economy. A common denominator in their lives is that they are generally confined to home, with restricted mobility, and in seclusion. Other, unwritten, hierarchical practices place further constraints on women. Throughout history, women have generally been restricted to the role of a home-maker; that of a mother and wife. Despite major changes that have occurred in the status of women in some parts of the world in recent decades, norms that restrict women to the home are still powerful in India, defining activities that are deemed appropriate for women. They are, by and large, excluded from political life, which by its very nature takes place in a public forum.

In spite of India's reputation for respecting women, including treating her as a Goddess, history tells us that women were also ill-treated. There was no equality between men and women. This is true of ancient, medieval and early modern times barring some revolutionary movements such as that of Basaweshwara, the 12th century philosopher in Karnataka, who advocated equality, casteless society, status for women, and betterment of the downtrodden. Reform movements in the 19th and 20th centuries led by great social reformers provided boost to women's legal status in India.

Independence of India heralded the introduction of laws relating to women. The Constitution provided equality to men and women and also gave special protection to women to realize their interests effectively. Special laws were enacted to prevent indecent representation of women in the media and sexual harassment in workplaces. The law also gives women equal rights in the matter of adoption, maternity benefits, equal pay, good working conditions etc.

At the international level, the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) sought to guarantee better legal status to women.

However, certain contentious issues like the Jammu and Kashmir Permanent Resident (Disqualification) Bill 2004 (which deprived a woman of the status of permanent residency of the State if she married an outsider) and the Supreme Court judgment in Christian Community Welfare Council of India (in an appeal over

the Judgment of the High Court, Mumbai). The latter has permitted, under certain circumstances, the arrest of a woman even in the absence of lady police and at any time in the day or night. These instances have once again brought to the forefront the traditional male domination.

FROM WOMEN TO GENDER

The theoretical foundations of development discourse have experienced many changes over the decades. The role of men and women in the development process has received much attention in the last few decades. Although the principle of equality of men and women was recognized as early as in 1945 in the UN Charter and the UN Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, researchers have pointed out that development planners worked on the assumption that what would benefit one section of society (especially men) would trickle down to the other (women). The new theory argues that a person's role was specified under a patriarchal framework where the scope of gender - masculine or feminine - was limited within the biological understanding of sex (male/female).

GENDER, DEVELOPMENT, WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

The above situation is especially visible in the world of development, and finds its clearest expression in proliferating references to "gender" in local, national and international forums, and activists. One repeatedly hears of gender bias, gender sensitization, gender planning and gender training, to mention just some of the more common examples of its contemporary use. To begin with, discussions were limited to only "women", rather than about systemic relations of inequality, involving the relations between both men and women.

The task in India then, as everyone seeks to take account of 60 years of independence from two centuries of British colonial rule, is to try and face up to this recent slice of history; a history we would like to claim as our very own. What would an assessment of half a century of development thinking and planning look like from the perspective of women? In the 1991 World Bank Report on Gender and Poverty in India, Lynn Bennett announces: "Now, researchers, women's activities, and government departments are reaching a new consensus: women must be seen as economic actors - actors with a particularly important role to play in efforts to reduce poverty". But, the *Shramshakti* report on self-employed women and women in the informal sector published in 1988 deplored women's extremely vulnerable working conditions across diverse occupations under high levels of discrimination, as well as the range of health hazards women are exposed to on an everyday basis. If the World Bank report concluded that poor women are

clearly more efficient economic actors, with greater managerial and entrepreneurial skills than men, the

Shramshakti report recommended that women require greater access to resources, especially credit and social services. Wider disparities exist among various women's groups culturally and socially. As a result one can perceive as difference in the cognitive, connotative, and consumption patterns of women residing in various spheres of social and economic layers. The victims of exploitation and oppression have been largely women of the third world countries in general and lower sections among them in particular.

CULTURALLY:

- Gender specific specialization (work)
- Cultural definition of appropriate sex roles
- Expectation of role within relationship
- Belief in the inherent superiority of males
- Customs of marriage (Bride price/Dowry)
- Notion of the family as the private sphere and under male control
- Value that give proprietary right over women and girls.

ECONOMICALLY:

- Limited access to cash and credit
- Limited access to employment in formal and informal sector.
- Limited access to education.

As a result of the cultural and economic factors, women face discrimination right from the childhood. It is held that both in childhood and adulthood males are fed first and better. According to one estimate, even as adults women consume approximately 1000 calories less per day than men. The sex ratio in India stood at 933 females per 1000 males at the 2001 census and out of the total population, 120 million women lived in abject poverty. Lack of healthcare facilities and poverty has been resulting in India accounting for 27% of all maternal deaths worldwide. Death of young girls in India exceeds that of young boys by over 300,000 each year and every 6th infant death is especially due to gender discrimination.

FEMALE POPULATION IN INDIA

At the 2001 census, India had a female population of 496 million. India accounts 15% of World's women

characterized by vast regional differences and a variety of cultures. But, social discrimination and economic deprivation on the basis of gender is common to all, irrespective of religion, cast, community, and State.

Empowerment of women, gender discrimination, and violence against women, which have become serious subjects of sociological research in contemporary times, was hitherto neglected. While contemporary social changes have exposed women to unprotected socio-economic, cultural and political environment, there are no corresponding protective social systems and institutions of social justice to safeguard their interests. There are many who are sceptical about women's ability to exercise equal rights with men and about their capacity to play equal role with men. But such apprehensions are ill-founded in the context of the broader opportunities available for women following mechanization of industry and agriculture, enabling women to compete with men successfully.

Innovations in science and technology have removed the disparity between men and women attributed to physical strength alone. Women are able to handle modern appliances which require intelligence and training and not merely physical strength. Thus, India has now several women working as pilots, driving locomotives, buses, tractors and machinery in workshops. Sex as maternal factor in the area of legal rights has practically disappeared. It is not therefore fair to relegate women as a group to an inferior position in society. The Constitution does not regard sex as a permitted classification and prohibits sex as a basis of differential treatment in all areas of legal rights.

Modernity has resulted in a growing flexibility and changes in the gender roles of men and women. The earlier conception that man was the provider of basic

necessities for family and women the child bearer and care taker of home, is no longer valid in the changing social structure and economic compulsions.

In spite of the progress made, rural women and those belonging to the Dalit, Tribal, and nomadic communities remain unaffected. So is the case with Muslim women among the minorities. The latter are far from realizing their basic rights. For instance, the low level of political participation of Muslim women in India is not only a consequence of the lack of resources but also the result of the status of Muslim women in the community. Since women in India have little place in the public arena they also express less faith in the political process.

In spite of the UN Charter of Human Rights and the provisions of the Indian Constitution, women continue to be victims of exploitation. The view that the future generation of a family is carried on and preserved by boys-only has degraded the position of women in society. Similarly, it is noticed that majority of the women are lacking in the spirit of rebellion. If careful attention is not paid and major steps are not taken, the situation will become extremely critical. Therefore, any attempt to assess the status and problem of women in a society should start from the social framework. Social structure, cultural norms, and value systems are crucial determinants of women's role and their position in society. In respect of the status there is a gap between the theoretical possibilities and their actual realization.

CRIMES AGAINST WOMEN

The crimes against women fly directly against orchestrating women empowerment in India. A report on the crime against women by the National Crime Bureau (2012) comes up with some alarming statistics.

Sl. No.	Crime Head	Year 2006	Year 2007	Year 2008	Year 2009	Year 2010	Year 2011	Year 2012	Percentage Variation in 2012 over 2011
1	Rape (Sec. 376 IPC)	19,348	20,737	21,467	21,397	22,172	24,206	24,923	3.0
2	Kidnapping & Abduction (Sec. 363 to 373 IPC)	17,414	20,416	22,939	25,741	29,795	35,565	38,262	7.6
3	Dowry Death (Sec 302/304 IPC)	7,618	8,093	8,172	8,383	8,391	8,618	8,233	-4.5
4	Torture (Sec. 498-A IPC)	63,128	75,930	81,344	89,546	94,041	99,135	1,06,527	7.5
5	Molestation (Sec. 354 IPC)	36,617	38,734	40,413	38,711	40,613	42,968	45,351	5.5
6	Sexual Harassment (Sec. 509 IPC)	9,966	10,950	12,214	11,009	9,961	8,570	9,173	7.0
7	Importation of Girls (Sec. 366-B IPC)	67	61	67	48	36	80	59	-26.3
8	Sati Prevention Act, 1987	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	-100.0
9	Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956	4,541	3,568	2,659	2,474	2,499	2,435	2,563	5.3
10	Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986	1,562	1,200	1,025	845	895	453	141	-68.9
11	Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961	4,504	5,623	5,555	5,650	5,182	6,619	9,038	36.5
	Total	1,64,765	1,85,312	1,95,856	2,03,804	2,13,585	2,28,650	2,44,270	6.8

LEGAL STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIA

India has a long and a continuing tradition extending over centuries of oppression of women. Women enjoyed an honorable position in the distant past. Subsequently patriarchy deprived women of their rightful status in India. During the Vedic period woman was given an honored position. She was the mistress of her husband's home. During the time of Kautilya remarriage and divorce was permitted, even child marriages was on the rise especially between children belonging to age group from 8 to 12. But, a wife could inherit her husband's property only in the absence of a son. Even then she had only a widow's estate. She could not sell or otherwise dispose of her property which would, on her death, revert to the husband's other heirs. She was however entitled to stridhana that is property gifted to her by her parents, presents received etc. over which she had an absolute right. On her death this would devolve on her female heirs.

A woman was not entitled to adopt when her husband was living. An adoption was always permitted to man. In most schools of Hindu law, a woman could adopt with her husband's permission and in the absence of such authority with the consent of his kinsmen. A girl could not be adopted, as adoption was only a means for a man without son, who could alone save him from the hell.

Reference has already been made to the practice of Sati in certain parts of India and the passing of legislation prohibiting Sati. The Hindu Widow Remarriage Act, 1856, the Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929 the Hindu Women's Right to Property Act 1937 and the Hindu Women's Right to Separate Residence and Maintenance Act 1946 were some of the measures that sought to improve social and economic status of women to a very limited extent.

The framers of the Indian Constitution rightly felt that it was not sufficient to confer some minor benefits on women, but it was necessary to declare in unequivocal terms, their right to equality with men and various other rights which would help them in attaining an equal status or an equal footing with men. These include Articles 14, 15 and 39, among others, in the Constitution. Besides the provisions in the Constitution, the following legislations were passed since 1950:

- The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955
- The Hindu Succession Act, 1956
- The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act
- The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961
- Equal Remuneration Act, 1976

- The maternity benefit act 1961

During ancient times when women were content to play the role of a wife and mother, they were treated with respect. Cases of molestation of women and outraging their modesty were few during those times. But unfortunately in recent times cases of rape has become more common and violence against women has been on increase. To meet these atrocities against women, various stringent punishments have been provided in the law. These enactments have, to some extent, have enabled women in India secure social and economic justice; especially in case of Hindu women.

An important step was taken in securing social justice to women as the Hindu Marriage Act which gave women the right to divorce by mutual consent. Despite such legislation it has to be admitted that cases of divorce are rare in our country. If it is due the fact that there is harmony in marriage and there is no need for divorce, it would be a cause for satisfaction. But the truth of the matter is that divorce cases are rare because the divorcee is regarded as many as social outcast. So it is the attitude of Hindu society which society which Pregnancy Act even confers a right on a woman to cause her pregnancy to be terminated with male members. In Kerala, joint family system was abolished.

Under the law women are entitled to equal pay as men for equal work. They are further entitled to the maternity benefits under the Maternity Benefits Act. Today as we see women have secured an honorable position in all sectors of work. The employment opportunities for women are increasing day by day and they are preferred more than men.

Other legislative measures favoring women include the Guardians and Wards Act, 1890. Section 19 of the Act includes mother along with father as a fit person to be appointed as the guardian so as to remove gender inequality. The Hindu Marriage (Amendment) Act has led to providing irretrievable break down of marriage as a ground for divorce. This amendment would be a welcome change if it would put an end to:-

- The toxic culture of making baseless and false allegations of abuse and cruelty to obtain divorce.
- The mindless practice of painting fathers as abusive and unfit parents and separating them from children.
- The business of daylight robbery in the name of alimony and maintenance to the wife.

- The custom of prolonged legal battles which end up destroying the lives of men, women and children.

Though under the Constitution and under the law women have equal political right as men so as to enable them to take part effectively in the administration of the country, even today there is no adequate representation of women in political field. Representation of women in Assemblies and Parliaments is dwindling with every election and does not exceed 10%. During elections, very few get a chance of being elected against a male candidate. In villages specially men have a dominant voice and are able to dictate to women whom they should vote. Most of them are illiterate and are dependent on their husbands or fathers. Unless and until women are educated and made aware of their rights and attain independence, one cannot expect a woman to take an active part in the administration of the country in large numbers. Also if some sort of reservation is not made for women in the State Assemblies and Parliament, it is practically impossible for women to be elected in the male dominated world. A Bill to provide for 33% reservation for women in the State Assemblies and Parliament is yet to become a law.

The government of India has appointed the National Commission for Women to protect the interests of the women at large. The Commission is vested with powers of a Civil Court. It is entrusted inter alia with the task of looking into complaints, take suo motu notice of non-implementation of laws relating to women and non-compliance with policy decisions, guidelines and instructions aimed at mitigating the hardships and ensuring the welfare and providing relief to women.

Today women have attained a remarkable position in probably all fields and they are in no way inferior to men. India has a remarkable history with women from being the Prime Minister to the Governor and then to the President. There are many able doctors, lawyers, and top bureaucrats. Even in business they are occupying high positions. Women are in police force, air force and even scaling the Mount Everest is not beyond their capacity. Thus as we have seen, various laws have been made by the legislature in the interests of women. The need of the hour is for the women to realize their rights and be vigilant. Women are the present and the future of INDIA.

EMPOWERMENT –CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The origins of the concept of empowerment go back to the civil rights movement in the USA in the 1960. It has since then been interpreted differently and filled with new meanings and is today used in such different sectors as business, social work, development discourse and by advocates of very different political agendas. The different definitions of empowerment range between defining it as a largely individual

process of taking control of and responsibility for one's life and situation, and defining it as a political process of granting human rights and social justice to disadvantaged groups of people. At the former end of the continuum, where empowerment is defined largely as an individual process, empowerment can be used in the conservative political rhetoric of freeing the government of responsibility for injustices and for granting social security. Instead, the argument makes individuals and communities responsible for their own social security and welfare, without providing the necessary support and resources. 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. At the Social Summit in Copenhagen in 1993 and the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo 1994 Governments committed themselves to the empowerment of women. This commitment was operationalised and formulated into a clear action plan at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995 where Governments committed themselves to the "empowerment and advancement of women, 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."

DIFFERENT LEVELS OF EMPOWERMENT

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 woman 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 different levels are seen as interconnected and mutually reinforcing, e.g. when empowerment on individual level occurs, this will have effect on the group and societal level. Women who are empowered on an individual level will most likely go on and affect the other levels. Empowerment on a group level e.g. women organizing around a particular need is likely to have effect on the individual empowerment of the

women in the form of increased self-esteem and sense of agency.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

The status of Women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millenniums. 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, Rajaram mohan 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. The real change came after independence. 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 [article 15 (1)] equality of opportunity (Article 16) etc. Feminist activism picked up momentum in India during later 1970's. Later on many groups and NGO's have been working for the Empowerment of women. We are proud that in India Women got voting right much before USA and some other European countries.

STEPS UNDERTAKEN IN INDIA FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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. The various articles mentioned in the earlier paragraph are meant for ensuring gender equality. Moreover the Constitution also empowers the states to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favor of women.

The real impetus for this movement was gained when under the Priministership of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, a scheme known as Indira Mahila Yojana was launched, UNDP also incorporated issues of women upliftment 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 women. So that 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 Economic 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.

Dramatic movement in the system just by including women members in Gram Panchayat. At the same time, it is also essential to shed certain stereotyped prevailing notions about role and importance of women in socio-economic development. Women should be encouraged to play a more active part. The male representatives have to establish a rapport with female representatives and give due respect and attention to their views. In the process of development and decision-making women have to operate along with men of course, there is some awareness among women due to reservation for them in the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). But there is need for appropriate training and education relating to different aspects in functioning of Panchayats to make women members conscious enough about their effective role and representation in the Panchayat Samiti. This kind of training can be organized at the district or block level immediately following the election. We have to understand that women representatives can play a vital role in the formulation and implementation of various women and child development programmes. This would increase the efficacy of such programmes. For instance, the women representatives and Gram Panchayat should have sufficient control over the primary education, primary health care and running of the public distribution system.

The state must pass and enforce legislation so that the status of women in society is brought to a respectable level through the long arms of the law. In 1985, a separate department of Women and Child Development was set up. In the Sixth Five Year plan, a separate chapter on "Women and Development" was included. The government had started and implemented major programmes like Support to Training-cum- Employment for Women (STEP), Mahilakosh, Women's Development Corporation, etc. However, legislations and efforts of the state have not made deeper in-roads into the rural and urban areas. For example, sex determination of foetus still continues in all the rural regions of the country despite the enforcement of legislation on Pre-natal

Diagnostic Technique (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act, which was passed in 1994. The women of India must oppose this sex determination of foetus, eve-teasing, bride burning, child marriage, exploitation in the offices, lower wages for labour etc. women from all walks of life must unite and must give priority to their education, growth and the prosperity of their families. Police should accept more female officers and constables so that they are able to deal with the female victims of our society. Female infanticide, female torture, Sati and dowry must be banned in the country.

Women must become literate, as education is beneficial for them as well as their families. The family web is woven around the women. She has to be up to the mark and educated so that she could fend for herself and her family during the hour of crisis. The status of women would improve only if they educate themselves and grab every opportunity to become stronger and more powerful than before.

The discussion brings a major conclusion to light-the status of women could be improved by women themselves and nobody else. It is the modern era of satellites, achievements and technology-based gadget. Why should women be left behind?

There should be a better and fuller understanding of the problems peculiar to woman, to make a solution of those problems possible. As these problems centre round the basic problem of inequality, steps should be taken to promote equality of treatment and full integration of woman in the total development effort of the country.

The main stress should be on equal work and elimination of discrimination in employment. One of the basic policy objectives should be universal education of woman, the lack of which tends to perpetuate the unequal status quo. The popular UNESCO slogan should come in handy:

“Educate a man and you educate an individual; educate a woman and you educate a family.”

Women will have to empower themselves ‘from below’ in order to compel the government to empower them ‘from above’. Further, there is a need for a change of values and behaviour in the society, a need for positive socio-cultural and economic empowerment and above all the will power and strong determination of women to join politics. Education can play a vital role in bringing about the desirable behavioural changes among the women and make them well equipped in terms of knowledge, competence and capacity to deal with different political problems.

It may be concluded that women have shifted traditional assumptions about their roles and capabilities. There has been a marked change, and it has been for the better. Many of its benefits however have yet to touch the majority and all of us continue to

experience various forms of gender discrimination. If laws designed to address the concerns of women are to have a dramatic and positive impact on women’s lives, they must be sensitive to the social, economic and political disempowerment of women throughout the world. The most important measure of their success should be the extent to which they enable woman to interpret, apply and enforce laws of their own making, incorporating their own voices, values and concerns.

Why is there still a Need for Women Empowerment?

Inspite 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 foeticide 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. These are the states where female feticide is maximum. The female literacy rate is also lower than the male literacy rate.

The ground reality is deprivation, degradation 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. Dr. Dashrath Bhuyan in his article titled “Empowerment of Indian Women : A challenge of 21st century” writes “Women are being brutalized, Commodified, materialized and subjected to inhuman exploitation and discrimination” Inspite 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 independently.

REASONS FOR THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Today we have noticed different Acts and Schemes of the central government as well as state government to empower the women of India. But in India women are discriminated and marginalized at every level of the society whether it is social participation, political participation, economic participation, access to education, and also reproductive healthcare. Women are found to be economically very poor all over the India. A few women are engaged in services and other activities. So, they need economic power to stand on their own legs on par with men. Other hand, it has been observed that women are found to be less

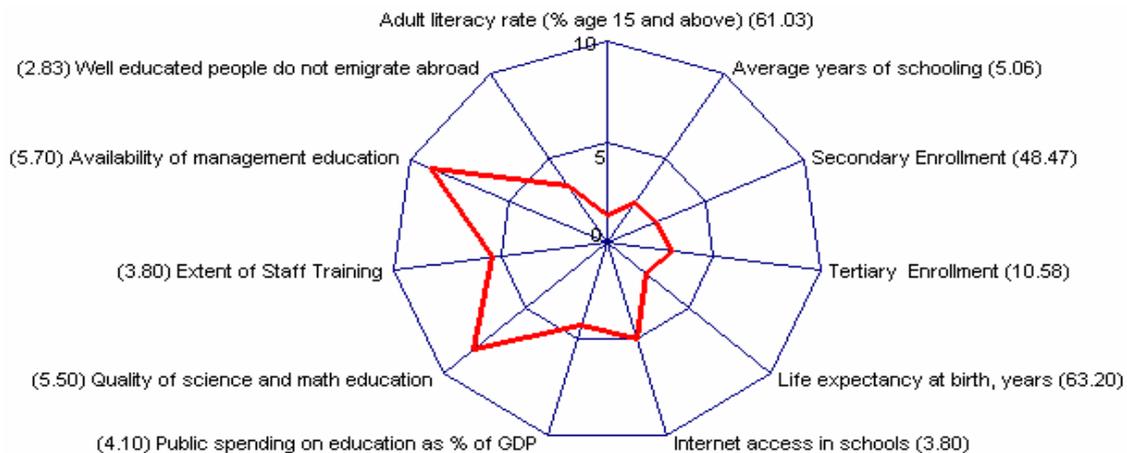
literate than men. According to 2001 census, rate of literacy among men in India is found to be 76% whereas it is only 54% among women. Thus, increasing education among women is of very important in empowering them. It has also noticed that some of women are too weak to work. They consume less food but work more. Therefore, from the health point of view, women folk who are to be weaker are to be made stronger. Another problem is that workplace harassment of women. There are so many cases of rape, kidnapping of girl, dowry harassment, and so on. For these reasons, they require empowerment of all kinds in order to protect themselves and to secure their purity and dignity. To sum up, women empowerment cannot be possible unless women come with and help to self-empower themselves. There is a need to formulate reducing feminized poverty, promoting education of women, and prevention and elimination of violence against women.

GLOBALIZATION

Globalization has presented new challenges for the realization of the goal of women’s equality, the gender impact of which has not been systematically evaluated fully. However, from the micro-level studies that were commissioned by the Department of Women & Child Development, it is evident that there is a need

for re-framing policies for access to employment and quality of employment. Benefits of the growing global economy have been unevenly distributed leading to wider economic disparities, the feminization of poverty, increased gender inequality through often deteriorating working conditions and unsafe working environment especially in the informal economy and rural areas. Strategies will be designed to enhance the capacity of women and empower them to meet the negative social and economic impacts, which may flow from the globalization process.

SOCIAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN



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. Programmes 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 programmers’ need to be organized 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 AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Education is a powerful tool of social transformation. Hence, education for Women has to be paid special attention. 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.

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT THROUGH SKILL DEVELOPMENT

The 11th five year plan (2007-12) has recognized India's massive need to skill millions of formal and informal workers in the next ten years. In response, the government developed an ambitious scheme "of increasing the proportion of formal and informal skilled workers in its total workforce from a mere 2% now to 50% by 2022, thus creating a 500 million strong resource pool." Women form a significant proportion of this work force in India, however, they are largely concentrated in the informal sector, engaged in vocations characterized by low earning, low productivity, poor working conditions and lack of social protection.

The National Skill Development Mission, headed by the Prime Minister, was launched in 2008, and a Co-ordinate Action Plan for Skill Development was formulated with a three tier structure that includes,

- a. The Prime Minister's National Council on Skill Development, as the apex body for advice on policy and interventions,
- b. The Skill Development Co-ordination Board to device detailed strategies, guidelines and instructions based on the advice of the council, and
- c. The National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC), a non-profit company registered under the Companies Act of 1956.

The role of the corporation is to identify the full range of skill development needs, develop processes with special emphasis on excellent standards and certifications, training of trainers, and proper delivery of training. Historically, vocational training has been primarily coordinated by Directorate General of Employment and Training (DGET) under Ministry of Labour and Employment (MOLE), Government of India; while technical training falls under the Ministry of Human Resource Development. "The main objective of vocational education and training (VET) is to furnish the technical and management skills and help develop appropriate attitudes for specific occupations and jobs." However, this traditional objective is being widened now to include approaches and interventions that promote capacity building and empowerment, and not just training per se. The present focus is to develop and achieve sustainable improvements in the livelihoods of the poor.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

As noted earlier, the aim of skill development, particularly in case of women, is not merely to prepare them for jobs, but also to improve the performance of women workers by enhancing the quality of work in which they are engaged. The NSDC has identified a few of the major challenges, which need to be

addressed for building a conducive ecosystem, of skill development for the women workforce. These are as follows,

- i. "The large number of women who need to be trained since currently only 2% of the female workforce is formally trained, inadequacies in the quality and relevance of TVET (technical and vocational employment training in India),
- ii. inadequate Infrastructure, acute shortage of trained women workers, poor quality of training,
- iii. Lack of mechanisms to judge and certify quality,
- iv. Inequity in access to TVET for women
- v. Low level of education of potential women trainees that limits training of women in the formal sector,
- vi. Lack of recognition of prior learning of potential women trainees
- vii. Relatively high opportunity cost of learning involved for training women."

The major challenges noted here are few in number but represent a complexity of issues involved.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT-STILL AN ILLUSION OF REALITY:

Notwithstanding the remarkable changes in the position of women in free India, there is still a great divergence between the constitutional position and stark reality of deprivation and degradation. Whatever whiff of emancipation has blown in Indian society, has been inhaled and enjoyed by the urban women, their population belonging to the rural areas are still totally untouched by the wind of changes. They still have been living in miserable conditions, steeped in poverty, ignorance, superstition and slavery. There still exists a wide gulf between the goals enunciated in the Constitution, legislations, policies, plans, programmes and related mechanisms on the one hand and the situational reality on the status of women in India, on the other. The human rights scenario in the country continues to be dismal and depressing. Women are being brutalized, commodified, materialized and subjected to inhuman exploitation and discrimination. Although, gender discrimination has been banned by the Constitution and women have been guaranteed political equality with men, yet there is a difference between the constitutional rights and the rights enjoyed in reality by women. Even after half a century of independence, barring a few exceptions, women have mostly remained outside the domain of power and political authority.

Although they constitute about half of the citizen and over the years their participation by way of voting has increased, yet their participation and representation in law making and law implementing bodies are not very satisfactory. No doubt the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment acts have provided access to women in the decision making process at the grass-root level but their representation in the Parliament and state legislatures is woefully poor. Insecurity does not allow the women leaders to identify leadership at the grass-root level. In politics when a man proposes, they themselves depose. In reality women representatives are ornamental in nature and political consciousness is found lacking among them. They are affected by the caste and class divisions, feudal attitudes, patriarchal nature of the family and village-social, environmental, ethnic, religious separatism and the like. They are members on record only. Allegedly, they are not consulted while taking decision. Thus, women representatives are not free from male dominance in the village administration and no significant change in the power equal is observed in the villages.

In these days of scam-ridden politics, the increasing role of money and mafia in elections keeps most of the women away from politics. Increasing violence and vulgarity against them intimates women and consequently they prefer to stay out of politics.

What are the reasons for this sorry state of affairs? Issues may be various and varied, however a few basic issues deserve specific mention:

Lack of awareness

Lack of social and economic empowerment

Lack of political will

Feebleness of accountability mechanisms

Lack of enforcement by the police force

Lack of gender culture

The question arises, how greater participation of women in politics can be achieved? Generally, the answer is suggested in the form of 'reservation'. However, mere reservation will not solve the problem unless and until women are given commensurate powers to function effectively and they themselves become more conscious and aware of their rights and duties.

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