

## Introduction

Women's empowerment is the process in which women elaborate and recreate what it is that they can be, do, and accomplish in a circumstance that they previously were denied. Alternatively, it is the process for women to redefine gender roles that allows for them to acquire the ability to choose between known alternatives that have otherwise been restricted from such ability. Women population constitutes around 50 per cent of the World Population. For the balanced inclusive growth, empowerment of women is the need of the time. 'Women empowerment' and 'women equality with men' are the universal issues. The present paper attempts to explore the concerns of women from the earlier days to the contemporary era.

### What the term 'Women Empowerment' stands for?

Women empowerment refers to increasing and improving the social, economic, political and legal strength of the women to ensure equal right to women, and to make them confident enough to claim their rights such as:

- Freely live their life with a sense of self-worth, respect and dignity;
- Have complete control of their life, both within and outside of their home and workplace;
- To make their own choices and decision;
- Have equal rights to participate in social, religious and public activities;
- Have equal social status in the society;
- Have equal rights for social and economic justice;
- Determine financial and economic choices;
- Get equal opportunity for education;
- Get equal employment opportunity without any gender bias;
- Get safe and comfortable working environment.

Women not only in India but all over the world have been treated as occupying secondary position to men. We often come across experiences where women are not only treated as subordinate to men but are also subject to discriminations, humiliations, exploitations, oppressions, control and violence.

Even the mainstream political theorists have often ignored the issue of gender differences. Political theory is full of examples of women being dismissed- from Aristotle's exclusion of all women from political activity, Rousseau's arguments for women to be educated differently from men and excluded from citizenship to Nietzsche's claim that equal rights for women are evidence of a society in decline.

### Women in India: Pre-independence era

Manish Chandra  
Research Scholar Banaras Hindu University

### *Ancient period*

The relationship between both sexes during the ancient period was characterised by a reciprocity in which the rights and obligations of each were nearly equivalence. Neither the Rig-Veda nor other Sutras enjoyed any kind of binding obedience of the wife to her husband. She was free to participate in all religious practices and sacrifices and was entitled to all the samskaras or religious sacraments like men; not only were religious prayers and sacrifices jointly offered by the husband and the wife, but the wife alone could offer them in absence of her husband. They had equal legal rights- unmarried women got a share of patrimony with the other sons whereas married women retained the rights over her wealth or property.

However, in the later phase, this balance underwent change, and the status of women started declining.

### *Medieval Period*

The declining trend of later phase of ancient period further deepened after the Muslim conquest of India. It introduced the purdah system and further pushed women deep into domesticity. Sati system also became prevalent in this era along with religious ban on the widow remarriage. In general, the Indian society was patriarchal overt rules prohibiting women from specific activities and denying certain rights. The salvation and happiness of women revolve around their virtue and chastity as daughters, wives and widows.

### *The British Colonial Period*

Partly coming into contact with the English education and partly as a reaction to British rule, there sprang up many reformist movements in India. Brahmo Samaj, Prarthna Samaj, Arya Samaj and many other movements took up the cause of injustice against women. Raja Ram Mohun Roy denounced child marriage and sati system and worked for the emancipation of women. The nineteenth century also saw for the first time the enactment of social legislation by the government which included abolition of sati(1829), widow remarriage act(1856), civil marriage act(1872) etc.

Mahatma Gandhi called on women to give up purdah and to participate in politics. That is why the women of that era actively participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement and in the Quit India Movement too. However in general, there was not much change in the social attitudes towards women, particularly in rural areas. At the time of independence, they were outside from the mainstream of socio-economical process and in

actual, did not have a rightful place in society. Even after many years after independence, they are a minority at the decision-making level.

### **Women in India: Post-independence**

After independence numerous steps have been undertaken to provide constitutional safeguards and institutional framework for women welfare. The development of women has been one of the central focuses in developmental planning since independence. There have been various shifts in policy approaches from the concept of 'welfare' in the 70s to 'development' in the 80s and now to 'empowerment' after the 90s. Now the emphasis is on the inclusive empowerment- from raising social status to the inclusion of women in decision-making and their participation at the policy-formulation levels.

### **Why is Women Empowerment important?**

Equal opportunity, equal rights and equal status to the women is the need of the hour, to ensure a healthy inclusive development of the society.

1. Economic reason- A large number of women around the World are unemployed. The World economy suffers a lot because of unequal opportunity for women at workplaces.
2. Equally competent and intelligent- Women are equally competent and preventing them by diminishing opportunities means the deprivation of the society from getting benefits from the side of half of the population. Nowadays, women are even ahead of men in many socio-economic activities.
3. Talent and education- Women are as talented as men. Earlier women were not allowed higher education like men and hence their talents were wasted. But now they are allowed to go for higher studies and it encourages women to show their talents which will not only benefit her individually but o the whole world at large.
4. Overall development of society- The main advantage of women empowerment is that there will be an overall development of the society. As the women constitute almost fifty per cent of the population, their growth would lead to the growth of the society as well.
5. Economic benefits- Women empowerment also leads to more economic benefits not only to the society as well. It helps women to become independent and also to earn for their family which ultimately contributed towards the National economy.
6. Reduction in domestic violence- Women empowerment leads to lesser dependency on the male counterpart of the family, and thus leads to reduction in the magnitude of domestic violence. Uneducated and economically depended women are at higher risk for domestic violence than an educated woman.

7. Reduction in corruption- An educated woman knows her rights and duties and hence can contribute in reducing corruption.
8. Reduction in poverty- Women empowerment leads to the social and economic benefits to the society. Thus the added earnings of women help the family to come out of poverty trap.
9. National development- Last but not the least, women are increasingly participating in the national development process. They are making the nation proud by their outstanding performances almost in every sphere including medical science, social science etc.

### **Measures**

#### ***Constitutional Provisions***

In the Fundamental Right Resolution of the Indian National Congress adopted in 1931, it was postulated that 'freedom, justice, dignity and equality for women was essential for nation-building.' The framers of the constitution of India therefore tried to give proper place to the women in the social structure of the country. In the preamble of the constitution, the solemn resolve of the founding fathers contain two specific objectives which have a direct bearing on the status of women:

1. Justice- social, economic and political for all;
2. Equality- of status and opportunity for all.

Part 3 and part 4 of the constitution dealing with Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles elaborate these declarations in concrete forms-

- Article 14 of Fundamental Rights envisages that the state shall not deny to any person equality before the law or equal protection of law.
- Article 15 specifically prohibits discrimination on the grounds such as caste, religion and sex.
- Article 16 provides for the equality of opportunity in matters relating to public employment. The constitution at the same time, gives power to the state to make special provisions for women and children. The inclusion of this provision makes it possible for the state to enact legislature for the welfare of the women even if that violates fundamental rights in general.

Further the Directive Principles of State Policy provides women-specific directives:

- Article 39(a)- men and women equally has the right to an adequate means of livelihood.
- Article 39(d)- equal pay for equal work for both men and women.
- Article 42 – make provisions for just and human conditions of work and provisions of maternity relief.
- Reservation in Panchayati Raj.

Besides, the constitution also imposes a Fundamental duty on all citizens 'to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women.' The constitution of India has also granted universal franchise, thus women have equality both in right to vote and contest elections.

### **Statutory Provisions**

Since the very beginning of independence, India initiated legislation with a view to remove disparities regarding women. Thus various acts like Special Marriage Act 1954, the Hindu Marriage Act 1955, the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act 1956, the Hindu Adoption and maintenance Act 1956, Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women Act 1961 etc were enacted.

In January 1992, the National Commission for Women was established under the provisions of the Indian constitution as defined in the National Commission for Women Act of 1990. It was established to represent the rights of women in India and to provide a voice for their issues and concerns.

### **Welfare and Development Programmes**

From the very beginning, efforts have been made by the Government for inclusion of women's development in the plans and programmes of India. The approach to women's development in the first five-year plan was included in the 'community Welfare Programme.' The third and fourth five-year plans accorded a high priority to education and welfare of women. The fifth plan shifted the approach from 'welfare' of women to 'development' of women. In the sixth five-year plan, there was a major thrust on health, education and employment of women. Thus the concerns of women have been getting attention in the mainstream planning system of India.

### **World conferences on women**

India has been one of the participants in programmes for women's development undertaken at international level and has also signed various covenant and declarations at these fora. In 1946, the Commission on the status of women was established and now a part of Economic and social Council (ECOSOC). This commission drafted declarations and conventions; monitors and highlights issue on a spectrum of issues and serves as secretariat for major conferences on women issue.

In 1994, the International Conference on Population and Development for the first time recognised that gender equality and the empowerment of women by the means of education: health and education were linked to traditional population issues such as family planning.

These conferences created an international forum for women's rights, but also illustrated division between women of different cultures and the difficulties of attempting to apply principles universally.

### **Initiatives and Prospects**

Manish Chandra  
Research Scholar Banaras Hindu University

Firstly the move to reserve one-third seats in the parliament for women could probably be the boldest and biggest step taken by Indian Government in the area of women empowerment. The bill, if passed would result in more than 180 seats in the lower house occupied by women compared to less than 50 occupied currently. This might also produce a 'trickle down effect' where even the state governments would pass a similar bill to reserve 1/3 seats for women in the state legislature.

Secondly, to provide integrated social empowerment of women, the government initiated a scheme called as 'Swayamsidha' 2001 which helps them in establishing self-reliant women's self-help groups. The objective is to achieve all-round empowerment of women by ensuring direct access and control over resources.

Another initiative is a program called as STEP (support to training and Employment Program for women). The objective of this programme is to empower women by providing sustainable employment opportunities.

### **Challenges**

Various programmes together have already made significant impact in the lives of a number of women in the lives of a number of women in the traditional sectors. However, are these programmes sufficient? Although it has been making a significant contribution towards Gender Sensitization and women empowerment, there is still a far way to go.

- The maternity mortality rate in India is the second highest in the world. India accounts for more than 25% of all maternal deaths in the world.
- In a survey conducted by the WHO, more than 80 per cent of pregnant Indian women are found to be anaemic. This results in exceptionally high rates of child malnutrition. Malnourished women give birth to malnourished children, perpetuating the cycle.
- Only 39 per cent of Indian women attend primary schools. Most families pull them out of school, either to help out at home or from fear of sexual or mental violence.
- While women are guaranteed equality under the constitution of India, legal protection has little effect in the face of prevailing patriarchal traditions. Women lack power to decide whom they will marry, and are often married off before they reach the age of eighteen.

### **Concluding remarks**

As we progress from a developing nation towards a developed nation, every care must be taken to compositely develop and empower women along the way to stand true to what J.L. Nehru said 'You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women.' It can be conclusively stated that there has been a radical change in the movement for empowerment of women. Women are making significant gains in the

political sphere where increased participation is rapidly empowering women, boosting their confidence, and empowering their status and position in society. However, women continue to remain invisible and marginalised in decision-making bodies, leading to lack of a feminist perspective in political decision-making. The problems of women, which are primarily on account of social prejudice and conventional and traditional approach inherent in the system, can be solved only by changing the system and creating right public opinion.\

### **References**

1. Appendices 30- Empowerment of women in India, a new look at Modern Indian History (from 1707 to the Modern Times), B.L. Grover and Alka Mehta, S. Chand & Company Pvt Ltd, 2014
2. Chaudhary P. Women's Education in India: Myth and Reality, Har-anand Publication, New Delhi, 1995
3. Chapter 20, Law and Justice, India 2015
4. Chapter 21, Labour and Employment, India 2015
5. Chapter 22- Civil Disobedience 1930-1932, India's Struggle for Independence, Bipan Chandra, Penguin Books, 1989
6. Chapter 35- Quit India Movement and the INA, India's struggle for Independence, Bipan Chandra, Penguin Books, 1989
7. Chapter 38- Indian Women since Independence, India since Independence, Bipan Chandra, Penguin Books, 1989
8. Census of India 2011
9. GoI, 12<sup>th</sup> five-year plan(2012-2017), Planning Commission, Government of India, 2013
10. Hirway I. Where is gender in the 11<sup>th</sup> plan approach paper? , Economic Political Weekly, 2006
11. NCW, Report of the National Task Force on Technology Empowerment of women in Agriculture, National Commission for Women, New Delhi, 2004
12. Socio-religious Reforms and the National Awakening, India's Struggle for Independence, Bipan Chandra, Penguin Books, 1989
13. Kabeer, Naila. "Gender equality and women's empowerment: A critical analysis of the third

millennium development goal 1." *Gender & Development* 13.1 (2005): 13-24.

14. Mosedale, Sarah (2005-03-01). "[Assessing women's empowerment: towards a conceptual framework](#)". *Journal of International Development*.17(2),p.243–257. doi:[10.1002/jid.1212](#). ISSN [1099-1328](#).