

WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT

Challenges and Achievements

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Women and Empowerment :

A Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

Empowerment in the context of gender and development is most usefully defined as a process rather than end product; it is dynamic and changing and varies widely according to circumstances. Empowerment process will take a form which arises out of a particular cultural, ethnic, historical, economical, geographical, political and social context; out of an individuals place in the life cycle, specific life experience and out of the interaction of all the above with gender relations prevailing in society”.

Empowerment helps in gaining opportunity and strength to voice opinion, access to information, exposure to new ideas and experiences, taking responsibility to make decisions and taking risks. Empowerment can be achieved through training, networking, evolving role that facilitating the process of enhancing capacity of individual and groups. It is to identify the needs, encourage commitment, ensure sustainability and personal development, create self-esteem and enable them to share power.

IMPORTANCE OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

In the context of human development in our society, empowerment of women and development of children has significant priority in all developmental efforts. Women and children together constitute about

one-third of the total population (2001) of our country. The women as target group account for 48.3 per cent of total population, as per 2001 census. Hence, development of women, safeguarding their interest is to ensure that they are brought into the mainstream to take advantage of the general developmental activities. Even the various sectoral policies announced in recent past – Health (2001), Nutrition (1993), Population (2000), Education (1992), Agriculture (2000) have stressed the need and focused on the comprehensive development of women (Planning Commission, 2002). The various efforts and activities for the development of women are based on the empowerment strategy that is increasing the capacity of the women.

Whether it is empowerment, in general or related to women can be understood access to power and control over resources and services. Achieving equality in opportunity, decision making power, gaining confidence, building productive capacities, challenging existing power relations, gaining control over resources are the essential components which an individual or a group has to achieve through the process of empowerment. The outcome of this process could be in the form of

- Process that neutralizes women's oppression. Bring out of their traditional subordination.
- Growth in the Grassroot political involvement
- Achievement of equal opportunity and equal roles in society.
- Becoming aware and gaining their own rights in social realities and play their role.

CONCEPT OF POWER

Power in relation to socio-economic and political aspects indicate control over resources and decision-making. The exercise of power by one over the other determines their perception, preferences, and choices of a group. This has happened in gender relation where women have 'internalised oppression'. When the control is internalised then it is necessary to create power in oneself".

According to Shrilatha Batliwala (1995) power is "control over resources, the ideology and self, exercised in a socio-economic and political context among individuals and groups". The resources include physical, human and financial resources. Control over ideology is the ability to determine and shape beliefs, values, attitudes

etc. Control over self is having thinking power, self-image, self-confidence and articulation.

While discussing empowerment Jo Rowlands (1997) has identified four different forms of power (i) Power over - control or influence over others, instrumentation of domination, (ii) Power to - generative or productive power which creates new possibilities and actions without domination. (iii) Power with - a sense of the whole being greater than the sum of the individuals, especially when a group tackles problems together, and (iv) Power from within - the spiritual strength and uniqueness that resides in each one of us and makes us truly human. Its basis is in self-acceptance and self-respect, which extend, in turn, respect for and acceptance of others as equals. Though the interpretation 'power to' and 'power with' empowerment is concerned with the process by which people become aware of their power and how those relates to the interests of others, but also participate in decision making and influence such decisions that affects them.

CONCEPT OF EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment is a term generally used to describe a process by which powerless people become conscious of their own situation and organize collectively to gain greater access to public service or to the benefits of economic growth. Empowerment is of two types. First, empowerment in general is related to the poor or those who are powerless. Second is the empowerment of women.

Empowerment of women is essential to emancipate women from the social evils called traditional and cultural customs. Women are marginalized over years together at various stages, and also they are branded as weaker and are kept aside from reaching the front stage. In this context, empowerment is required to increase awareness and capacity building for their greater participation in the decision-making, and transformation action (Suguna, B, 2001). This process enables women to make choices in personal life regarding education, employment, marriage etc. Providing various choices in woman's life depends on the support given by family members, institutional and community support. In this line of thinking Chandra (1997) defined "Empowerment of women as the redistribution of power that enable thus to challenge patriarchal ideology and the male dominance. It is both a process and the result of the process. In the process, not only

increase their capacity; but also enable them face new challenges in the overall development of the household and also to contribute to the local community development.

Empowerment as a concept is the result of the process which enables an individual to know about herself / himself, what she/he wants, express it, try to get it and fulfill their needs by enhanced confidence, awareness, mobility, choices, control over resources and decision making power. The process, which enables an individual to gain the above qualities, is called empowerment.

The process of gaining control over the resources, ideology and self, which determine power, can be called empowerment. When we apply this definition for empowerment of women, it is clear that women do not have power (or powerless) since they do not have control over resources. Even if they have, it is only to some extent over some resources. This power is limited by patriarchal norms, customs, traditions and social values imposed on them. In the family male person is considered as breadwinner, physical and financial assets are in his name and control, naturally power is in his hands. Women being deprived of access to and control over resources are denied of power. Even in the case of community, public property resources, institutions and political power is concentrated in the hands of men. Women are kept out of this domain. In this context women should have power by gaining control over the resources ideology and self. Empowerment of women is of great need. But empowerment is not limited to power. It is a larger and broader concept with vaster and different dimensions.

PROCESS OF EMPOWERMENT

The process of empowerment deals with how to increase capacity of women and what they need to become empowered. First they must be provided with and should get fulfilled certain essential needs. These basic needs could be provided through welfare services. Equal access to resources like educational opportunities, credit and property is the next step in the process of empowerment. Creating awareness among women about the existing gender discrimination, gender inequality is most important in empowering them. Then, they must recognize that their problems stem from Inherent structural and institutional discrimination.

The empowerment process in the developed countries is different from that of the developing nations of Third world. It is more strategical i.e., changing patriarchal norms, gender division of labour, gaining equality and changing the attitudes of society towards women in the developed countries. While in the developing nations, it is more focused on to meet the basic needs, increase in income, educating and give training in skill development to meet along with strategic gender needs. Meeting both practical needs and strategic interests are necessary to empower women. Women are the main caretakers in the families below the poverty line. Women contribute to the household income. Hence practical needs of these women related to daily life - food, housing, income, health care and welfare benefits ought to be met. But mere meeting practical needs do not empower women unless strategic interests are fulfilled. Strategic interests are long term and almost common to all women. They are related to improving women's position that include action to increase women's knowledge and skills, give them legal protection, provide equal opportunities / participation in decision making and greater access to resources etc. Strategic interests transform gender relations and empower women.

Empowerment also means having choices and women's ability to make choices. Women must be made to recognize the choices they have, enable them to make the choices. For example, education is one of the choices, women must be made aware of the importance of education and choices in the forms of education available; opportunity must be given and then they will make the best use of choices.

Equal participation of women in the decision-making leads to their empowerment. It could be achieved through mobilization and organization of women at all levels. Increasing consciousness and awareness building is the important component of the process of empowerment. First women must recognize the ideology that legitimizes domination and then understand how it perpetuates their oppression. They try to change the values and attitudes, which are "anti-women" that most women have internalized since their childhood. So self-consciousness and awareness must arise in each individual woman to empower themselves. But this self-consciousness and awareness does not come spontaneously, so is empowerment. Changing other women's consciousness must externally induce it. Altering self-image and beliefs about rights and capabilities could create consciousness among other women. Awareness of gender

discrimination challenging the sense of inferiority, recognizing the value of their labour and their contribution to the society and conscientisation will empower women.

Encouraging self-employment of women is also one way of empowering women who are in the unorganised sector. A good example is the work of SEWA Bharath in Gujarat, which believes in collective employment. The strategy of SEWA Bharath to empower women is protecting the interest of women workers, encouraging their participation at all levels of the organization and linking its membership with women's movement in protecting strategic gender issues such as dowry, rape, sati system and violence against women. It also works with other women's organizations to initiate action to change policies and laws in India. It draws the attention of public regarding the problems of poor self-employed women through media. So the experience of the SEWA Bharath shows that "women's empowerment has to be linked up with the struggle of other marginalized group if it is to be sustainable" (Naila Kabeer, 1996).

According to Kate Young (1993), "if the aim of the empowerment is transforming the society, then it should be undertaken as a political movement by challenging the existing power structure and gender relations which oppressed and subordinate the women. It should generate new structure of power which involves equity, sharing, giving, creating and developing the potentiality of every human being, as the present structure of power is hierarchical, exploitative destructive and aggressive. It should not lead to taking over the men's power and perpetuate the same exploitative and hierarchical structure. It should create a world of equality and make best use of potentiality of all human beings in constructing the more human world". ✓

The next question is what would be the consequences of women empowerment? How it affects their own life, men's life and society at large. Empowerment of women would create a new world of equality between men and women. It should remove the subordination of women. Once they become empowered, they can have control over their labour, income, sexuality, reproduction and mobility. They will not accept the existing stereotyped roles, gender division of labour, and any other beliefs or systems, which are oppressive.

Empowered women instead of remaining silent and unquestioning they become articulate and questioned they become

educated from uneducated, changed gender division, labour instead of accepting blindly, they got free mobility in the place of restricted mobility.

In the process of empowerment they become economically independent not only in earning but also in having control over their income. They would be able to face problems in the life either individually or collectively. They can socialize their children and make them more gender sensitive. They would be able to get a global view of their issues, which had limited view, by making personal issue a political issue. "If power is defined as 'power over', a gender analysis shows that power is wielded predominantly by men over other men, and by men over women. If women gain power it will be at men's expenses. There might be inherent threat due to some kind of reversal of relationships by which men will not only lose power but also face the possibility of having power wielded over them by women. Men's fear of losing control is an obstacle to women's empowerment. In this context of 'power over' women should be empowered to participate within the socio-economic and political structure of society, where as power to' refers to increasing one's ability to resist and challenge 'power over' (Jo Roland, 1997).

The process of empowerment cannot take place all of a sudden. It pass through various stages, like in the first stage women try to look into the situation from a different perspective, recognize the power structure and other institutional norms which subordinate them by keeping themselves away from them. In this stage they also try to share their feelings and experiences with other women and realize that it is not single women's experience but common to all.

The process of empowering women is a positive discrimination for women. But empowerment implies a positive role and participation of women in national development not only their own behalf but for the benefit of society at large. Empowerment of women enhances their ability to make choices within the family and in the society.

SELF HELP GROUPS AND EMPOWERMENT

The most recent approach to empower women is the organizational approach adopted both by government and non-government machinery. "The organizational approach for empowering rural poor women was emphasized to increase the absorptive capacity of the poor, provide them social strength for articulation and improved access to

development inputs and services". This ideology was adopted in government programmes like STEP, DWCRA, WDP in Rajasthan, awareness generation programmes of the Central Social Welfare Board and the Manila Smoky Project of Ministry of Human Resource Development to empower women at grass root levels through their own organization. Whereas non-governmental organization by organizing women at grass root level through self-help groups, organizing awareness programme, training in skill development are providing income-generating activities.

The SHG is an exclusive organization of women as direct stakeholders and also democratically organised and managed. The women have valuable common stakes in the SHG, which promoted or voluntarily organised in the communities. Such common stake in the groups, significantly have effect on their effective participation and also decision-making of their groups (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2001).

According to Shridharan, Damyanty (1997), the SHGs brings out the supremacy of women in moulding the community in right perspective and explore the initiative of women in taking up entrepreneurial ventures. "Women's contribution to national development is crucial". The process of economic development would be incomplete and lopsided unless women are fully involved in it. "Emancipation of women is an essential pre-requisite for economic development and social progress of the nation". The SHGs empower women and train them to take active part in the socio economic progress of the nation and make them sensitized, self-made and self-disciplined. The social limitations of women such as superstition, and dormant role in decision-making. The SHGs have inculcated a great confidence in the minds of rural women to succeed in their day-to-day life.

Once economic empowerment is achieved in terms of availability of credit facilities with better bargaining power, and other basic necessities of life has implications on overall social empowerment (Lalitha N. and Nagarajan B.S., 2002). Women participation with economic strengths in-group activities leads to changed self-image enhanced access to new information, skills, knowledge about resource availability and collective action. It results in improving their ability to take decisions both at home and in community.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Empowerment of women through Self Help Groups would lead to benefits not only to the individual women and women groups but also for the family and community as a whole through collective action for development. Empowering is not just for meeting their economic needs but also through more holistic social development Murgan and Dharmalingam (2000).

Self Help groups is the beginning of a major process of empowering women and to provide increased access to resources and control over factors contributing to women empowerment particularly in the areas of health, education, information, self-development, skills, employment and income generating opportunities. The self Help group to save and contribute to a common fund from which small loans are provided to the needy in the group. These SHGs have become appropriate community based organizations that hold key for participatory development, with an element of alternative rural credit delivery system (Puhazhendi V., 2000).

A study by B.K. Gopalakrishnan (1998) indicates the SHG women showed positive change towards child care, environment, sanitation, drinking water, public speaking and child education. Most of the women shown interest in sending their girl child to school and also involved in prohibiting arrack sales in their area. It indicates the involvement by the women in the overall development of their area.

As awareness of women enhanced under group strategy fared significantly than others in the empowerment process. Because, women in SHG got empowered with information on hygiene, sanitation and health (Sakuntala Narasimhan, 1999). The SHG strategy provides women chance for educative programme, awareness creation on issues such as drinking water and sanitation, family planning, literacy (M.D. Dodkey, 1999). Moreover, the group helps women to interact among themselves and enhance their participation in development.

As women are empowered with information and resources enabled them for initiating social action against dowry system, alcoholism, illiteracy and other social issues (Jaya Anand, 2000). The collective strength of women under the SHGs has increased their ability to take up and work for the social empowerment.

In Andhra Pradesh, SHGs are also involved in the awareness generation on pre-natal and post-natal stages, safe drinking water, family planning, pulse polio and maternity benefits scheme (C. Gangaiah, 2000). Further, they are enabled to access more information on development and welfare programmes implement for women development. Thus, the SHG work as a forum in which women can undertake collective action for their progress and also to fight against various social evils.

IMPACT

In some parts of the Assam, the women groups in the form of vigilance committees working at village level for supervising the execution and monitoring of the rural development activities (M. Ariz Ahmed, 1999). Thus, women groups shape as social activists in implementation of different development schemes. These women groups have also involved in prohibition of illicit liquor, afforestation, creating awareness on development schemes.

A.N. Sarkar (2001) says that majority of the economically weaker section came into SHG that resulted in increase of the value of assets owned, employment, average income of the members due to the SHG. The SHG strategy has made positive impact on the empowerment of women in terms of increasing their economic capacity.

Self Help group focus on change and change-oriented skills, to help women to achieve insight, empowerment, and finding a new way of life. This strategy has made the rural women to discover their strength, self-confidence, social and economic abilities and capacity (Snehlata Tandon, 2001). So, the SHG makes the women work collectively and understand their strengths, which they have and can be used for their development.

However, short-term participation by the women initiates the process of change with provision of information and support, whereas long-term involvement makes changes in the life style. This process can be understood as *effect* of the self-help group on women. K. Kokila (2001) observed that the SHG consists of women from homogeneous occupational background even from neighborhood, which helps them mutually trust each other. This has facilitated the women to learn to work collectively towards a set agenda and work in a democratic manner. The members not only required to voluntarily

form the SHG, but also come from same socio-economic and culture situation to maintain the mutual cooperation among the members. The SHG functions with the principle of “contribute according to your ability” and take according to your needs”. It indicates that individuals are motivated to work by using their ability and generate surplus to save (and also to repay loan) with SHG.

Thus, the Empowerment through group strategy is a multifaceted process, which encompass many aspects – enhancing awareness, increasing access to resource – economic and social, but of which an equally important component is the mobilization and organization of women into groups. The SHGs form the basis for solidarity, strengths and collective action for Empowerment and also linked to issues of social justice and equality in opportunity.

73RD AMENDMENT AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

In the Indian context, the process of empowerment has passed through various stages. In 1960s and 70s policies and programmes were not aimed at empowering women. There was no concept of women’s empowerment. But we could see that they work in such a way to take women towards empowerment. Since a large mass of women population comes from below the poverty line, the concentration was more on rural and poor women. The first step in empowering women was organizing them at grass root level by establishing mahila mandals. Their objective was to train women to become good house managers and learn some skills like tailoring, embroidery, childcare etc. No doubt, this pushed up the traditional stereotyped roles of women; but helped in organizing women at grass root level. Mahila Mandals were framed on the basis of American house manager scheme without thinking how far it is suitable to Indian women.

Later the focus was made on improving the education and health condition of women. Through compulsory and free education, importance to girl’s education, literacy campaign, adult education and national education policy efforts were made to improve the literacy and educational level of women.

Empowerment has emerged as a concept in the early eighties. But it had its roots in the early 1970s when the focus of development thinking was shifted from rapid economic growth to poverty

elimination and creating productive efficiency in the people. The traces of empowerment were found in strategies adopted to achieve women's development and equality. But earlier they were identified as target group or recipients of welfare programmes, but later identified as agents and partners of development. However, the notion of empowerment has become central point of discussion in women's development and women's equality.

In order to increase women's access to income, they were involved in rural development by identifying them as target groups in employment, loan facilities, housing and other schemes. Besides, to bring women into the mainstream of the development process, policy environment was created in 1980s by adopting various policies like education policy, nutrition policy and amendments in various acts related to women.

Giving opportunity to participate in decision making i.e., 33% reservation for women at the grassroots' democracy is also an important step in empowering women in India. Realizing that unequal opportunity is one of the reasons for the backwardness of women, which is leading to failure of development planning, efforts are afoot to create opportunities. Because of non-participation of women at decision-making at higher level, efforts are being made to make reservation for women at State Assembly and Parliament. No doubt this would be a major attempt in empowering women. But this is still a dream that is yet to become a reality. Besides, the role of women's movement in empowering women through creating awareness, resisting injustice done to women, organizing women, protecting women's rights, finding and solving women's problem cannot be neglected.

One of the major motives of the new Panchayati Raj system is to bring the women to participate in the decentralised decision making process. It is imperative to understand how gender as factor affects the participation. Women's participation in the Panchayat meetings was controlled by the presence of men, relative's inexperience and uncertainty in presentation. So, this has made the women members not to visit Panchayat office except for meetings (George Mathew, 1995). These are the reasons mainly considered for poor participation of women in the deliberations of the PRI. Moreover, this tendency also provided more scope chance for men to prompt the women members in the PRI meetings and decisions. It implies that the low level of

education and socio-economic background of the women makes them after election to be dependent on men in public decision-making.

Moreover, women having been denied their due share in public decision making for many years may not be interested to take up the responsibility all of a sudden. According Anupama and Susan (1995) the *social structure and economic status* influencing the attitude of women towards participation. So, women may not consider participation as their right, but consider as additional burden. Mere reservation is not enough to make the women to participate in PRIs but adequate training is needed to increase their capacity to effective participation by them.

Tremblay and Kumtakar (1998) observed that increasing in the number of women in the elected local bodies will not necessarily translate into their empowerment. They also attributed this situation to factors such as structures of formal politics, timings of the meetings, mechanism and style of functioning, discrimination against women. So, it implies that just making the weaker section as members in the PRI, may not lead to participation in the decision making process related the development activities.

No programme can be a success without the involvement of the people. The main reason for the failure of various programmes for rural uplift like the Community Development Programme, National Extension Service, etc. was due to the non-participation of people and their representatives at the planning and execution stages (Dhillon D.S. and B.S. Hansra, 1995). At the same time, it has been seen that non-involvement of women in the development programmes is also a great concern and challenge in the process of rural development

PARTICIPATORY EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment literally means, "becoming powerful". But in Social Work it connotes both theory and method. It is a theory "concerned with how people may gain collective control over their lives, so as to achieve their interests as a group and a method by which social workers seek to enhance the power of people who lack it". Empowerment is a process whereby women become able to organize themselves to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and control resources, which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination. Empowerment is a

participatory process, which begins at the levels of home and community. Empowerment is also a process of awareness and capacity building leading to transformative action, which enables individuals or groups to change balances of power in social, economic and political relations in society. Empowerment should give women freedom of choice, equal access to domestic and community resources, opportunities and powers.

Gender discrimination is a universal phenomenon. Both inside and outside the house, women are excluded from positions of power. They are denied the opportunities to participate in decision-making process. The primary challenge facing women today is to increase their participation and become actively involved in decision (Chandra 1997). Participation has two dimensions-quantitative and qualitative. People's participation in terms of numbers has no meaning. Today there is a need for change from quantitative to qualitative. Active participation in social, economic and political spheres would help in enhancing process of decision-making empowerment and it will also give women the desired self respect and social dignity and these of course, are the pre-requisites of empowerment. Karl (1995) rightly pointed out that, "increased participation of women in decision-making at all levels will help to "adjust" the goals pursued through development".

Participation is the point where women are taking decisions along with men equally. To reach this level, mobilization is necessary. By organizing themselves and working collectively, women will be empowered and gain increased representation which would lead to increase empowerment and ultimately greater control. The participation of women is also a prerequisite for eradicating of poverty.

The participation of women on equal partners in national development not only enhances their productivity and earnings potential but also raises their living standards and contributes to better economic performance, the reduction of poverty and improved family welfare. Gender-based inequality in most households, reinforced and enhanced in the legal, cultural, social, economic and institutional spheres contribute to women commonly being poorer than men.

Therefore participation helps individuals to achieve upward social and economic mobility and active power and status in society. Participation becomes a source of mobility, equality and empowerment both at the individual and at the societal level. Gender development

constitutes an important part of development in this context. It is important in this respect to bring women into the mainstream of development so that society benefits from the women empowerment.

CONCLUSION

The way of defining empowerment, choosing indicators of empowerment and objective of empowerment depends on whether the area of empowerment covered is individual growth or social and political change or both. Type of empowerment, time period, and target group whose empowerment we are discussing are more important in the process of empowerment. On whatever way empowerment is defined and understood it has limitations since it is related to states of mind and is qualitative in nature. Besides, elements of empowerment like knowledge, self respect, confidence and awareness are cultural specific and they vary among localities and by socio-economic groups. So, it is not possible to impose all indicators, meanings, to one individual or one indication or one meaning to all individuals.

Empowerment of women means enhancing awareness of individuals that can facilitate social development, politically active, economically productive and independent that enable to make their choices and appropriate decisions in matters at individual household and community level. This helps women to be more aware of their constitutional, legal rights, opportunities available for them to make their lives better. More importantly, the strategy of empowerment also helps women to achieve comprehensive development.

Empowerment of women may result in the emergence of single big mass group to protect the democratic values, to fight against the social evils, to fight for social justice, to work for the cause of all those who are deprived of it. But the way of empowerment is not free from hurdles. Patriarchal norms, traditional beliefs, economic system, political conditions make the task of empowering women more complicated. Since patriarchy is found to be very deeply entrenched both in men and women empowering women has become an extremely complex task. Achieving gender equality and changing the present gender relations requires widespread changes in the thinking and structure of every institution of changes in the society. Women's empowerment can only be achieved through integrated and synergetic thinking and action.

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