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## EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN: UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF COOPERATIVES

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### Abstract:-

Rural women are generally the poorest of the poor and at the same time, they are the pivotal actor in the development process. Therefore, eliminating social, economical and political discrimination against women is prerequisite for the sustainable and suitable development. Mainstreaming the women more specifically the rural women is the main development agenda of the present world. Cooperatives today have emerged as powerful local initiations for the economic development and social mainstreaming. Empowerment has always been fundamental to the cooperative idea where people get together to achieve goals that they would not be able to achieve on their own. Therefore, this paper has reviewed status of women in global scenario and tries to unleash the potential role of cooperatives in the empowerment of women. Further the paper has highlighted the role of cooperatives in guaranteeing the participation and opportunity for the women to promote their social and economic development. This paper is based on the review of the earlier literatures and research.

**Keywords:** Cooperatives, Empowerment, Participation, Opportunity, Psychological Well-Beings, Inclusion, Representation

### INTRODUCTION

#### STATUS OF WOMEN IN GLOBAL SCENARIO

Women constitute around half fold of the world's population and majority of them are poor and often poorest of the poor. In this sense we can sensitized poverty is gendered experience. Women are relegated from the various social, cultural, economical and political issues from home because of orthodox gender norms that are prevailed in the society. This has caused the deprivation of women always in all ways. More specifically, this is most prevailed in African, Middle East and South Asian nations. Let us overviews the status of women in economical, political and social aspects in the global scenario.

According to UN (2010), there are 57 million more men than women in the world. A surplus of men characterizes the world's most populous countries China and India hence, the large surplus of men worldwide. But in most of the countries, female population exceeded the male. Study made by Carlos & Zahidhi (2005) states that majority of the 1.5 billion people living on US\$ 1 per day or less are women. UNIFEM (2000) report on 'Progress of the World's Women' proclaimed that, in both developed and developing countries, women are still averaging slightly less than 78.0% of wages given to men for the same work and 70.0% of the agricultural labour are women globally. Women's

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participation in the labour market is also very disappointing, according to UN (2010), in 2010, women's labour force participation rates remain below 30 per cent in Northern Africa and Western Asia; below 40 per cent in Southern Asia; and below 50 per cent in the Caribbean and Central America. These statistical facts are enough to claim that, the economic opportunities and participation of the women is very much pathetic. Their access to resources and economic opportunities is very meager.

Similar, situation is prevailed in the spectrum of political empowerment too. Political empowerment simply refers to the equitable and justifiable representations to women in decision making structure and position. The report of Inter Parliamentary Union (2004) revealed that world average women's representations of women in parliament is only 15.6%. The statistics by regions offer many surprises, 6.8% in the Arab states, 18.6% in American states and 39.7% in the Nordic states. Likewise, the share of women among the ministers also averages hardly 17.0% similarly, only 14 women in the world currently are holding the post of either Head of State or Head of Government and the situation is too worst in the private corporate sectors too. Out of 500 largest cooperates in the world, only 2.6% i.e. 13 have female chief executive officers (UN, 2010). This shows that women have been discriminated in the public and private spheres.

Women are deprived of access to health and education as they are treated inferior to men. Situation of women in the health and education is also too much disappointing. WHO/UNICEF (1996) disclosed that 585,000 women die every year i.e. more than 1600 per day from the causes related to pregnancy and child birth only. Likewise, women comprise the majority of the illiterate population in most sub-regions of the world. Two thirds of the 774 million adult illiterates worldwide are women and 72 million children of primary school age are not attending school, out of which over 39 million i.e. 54.0% are girls (UN, 2010).

The above mention fact file of the world is enough to reflect the worst sketch of women. This figure demands that new paradigm of women empowerment is necessities that helps to empower the women from the ground level. Women throughout the globe were found that, they are in nastiest situation economical, political and social ground. In this respect, cooperative movement could be the effective and fruitful local institutional initiatives that may empower women economically, socially and politically. Therefore, it is very much essential to understand the role of cooperatives in the empowerment of women for the reduction of gender disparities which is prevailed since long time.

#### **WOMEN EMPOWERMENT**

Simply, empowerment is related with the enhancement of person's capacity. These capacities further widen the social, economical and political choices and freedom. The term women empowerment, specifically advocates the gender mainstreaming and integration of women in the process of development. The term 'Women Empowerment' more often used as 'Gender Equality', or 'Female Autonomy'. As we all know that women all over the world have challenging gender biased since the beginning of the history and overcoming against the challenges of gender biases is the women empowerment.

Women's empowerment consists of gaining the ability to generate choices and bargaining power, developing the sense of self-worthy, a belief in one's ability to secure desired changes and the right to control one's life (UNIFEM, 2000). Similarly, World Bank (2001) advocated that women empowerment can be achieved through gender equality and equality of opportunities and equality of voices are keys for gender equality. Likewise, UN (2002) defines that gender equality is the cornerstone of very democratic society and it can be achieved by the widening capabilities and opportunities.

From the above discussion, it is obvious that, enhancing capabilities and opportunities are the key factors of women empowerment. More precisely women empowerment can be achieved by guaranteeing the economical, political and social participation and opportunities to the female without any discrimination. Therefore, in the next section, we will discuss how cooperatives are viable local initiatives for the women empowerment.

### **ROLE OF COOPERATIVES IN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT**

Cooperative movement has very long history; it will trace us to the nomadic era. During this era we find that nomadic people used to unite and co-operate each other in pursuing their common goal of hunting. The cooperation among or between peoples for the livelihood is instinct phenomenon of the human beings. However, the modern form of cooperation was introduced only in the mid of 19th century after the establishment of 'Rochdale Society for Equitable Pioneer' in England in 18th March, 1844 in the initiation of industrial labours. This Rochdale Society is considered as the first modern form of cooperatives of the world. Literatures revealed that, this society was formed by the group of industrial labour to get rid from the economical problems caused by the rapid industrialization and to secure the life of working class from it. Since then, the web of cooperative movement has spread slowly and gradually to throughout the world.

Today, cooperative movement has gaining popularity in all type of economy whether it is developed or underdeveloped or capitalist or socialist and at the same time, it is very difficult to get even a single economy in the world where cooperative movement has not accommodated. Cooperative movement has gaining momentum all over the world, whether it is leading economy like USA, Canada, England or the emerging economy like India, South Africa, Japan or the developing economy like Nepal, Bangladesh and various countries of Africa or South America. Doubtlessly, cooperative movement has become a technique of economic development and tool for social development because world economy has witnessed cooperative movements as double edge sword of economic development and social inclusion.

Cooperatives as an economic enterprises had enormous role in the reduction of poverty and income inequality, employment generation and resource mobilizations at the same time as a social entity too had affluent role in the development of capable and inclusive egalitarian society. Cooperatives have been regarded as one of the best local institutional paradigm for empowering economically backward and socially excluded section of the society. Women since the long history, are found deprived and discriminated always in all ways can be empowered via cooperative movement. ILO Recommendation No. 193 (2002) on the Promotion of Cooperatives explicitly states that "special consideration should be given to increasing women's participation in the cooperative movement at all levels, particularly at management and leadership levels.

Organizing women into cooperatives helps to consolidate efforts, creates voices and enhances self-reliance for socio-economic transformation (Desta, 1999). Cooperatives as community driven initiatives play a vital role in the reduction of gender based discrimination. Cooperatives laws are 'gender neutral' and do not discriminate against women (ILO, 2002).

The cooperative movement has recognized that ensuring gender equality is not just the right thing to do, in terms of respecting rights and the cooperative principles, but also makes good business sense given that investing in women has high returns at both the level of the individual enterprise as well as at the macro level in terms of poverty reduction and development (ILO, 2012).

### **D) Economic Participation and Opportunities**

Cooperatives as an economic enterprises perform various economic activities for the improvement of features, particularly of the members. Cooperatives enable members to organize and improve their economic conditions. They promote and support entrepreneurial development, creating productive employment, rising income and helping to reduce poverty (UN, 2009). Cooperatives have been providing direct jobs to one billion people and indirect jobs to three billion people globally. Therefore, cooperatives could be a vibrant technique of economic participation and opportunities for the rural women.

Economic participation and opportunities of the women can be sensitized when women have control over income, contribution in family support and access to resources. For this women need to be represented in paying jobs or in income generating activities. Today, cooperatives had become a vibrant technique for job creation and wealth generation. Women by joining cooperatives can enjoy the services of cooperatives and get involved in income generation activities. Cooperatives offer easy access for entrepreneurial credit and training for self-employment and modernization of agriculture. As well as cooperatives could provide direct jobs to the women. Today,

cooperatives are found running various micro enterprises and in various public utilities like electricity production, communication, health sector and so forth. These all guarantee the women's access to job, ownership of assets, access to credit, access to market and enhance their bargaining power, this ultimately empowers them. Economic empowerment is the core in this materialistic economy.

#### ii) Political Participation and Opportunities

Cooperatives by the principle are democratic organizations, which operate under the democratic values and norms. Women's participation in cooperatives provides them a good platform to understand the democratic practices. Cooperatives offer ample opportunities to exercise voting rights and representing in election for the members of different committees. This guarantees the women's representation in the various bodies of cooperatives in one hand and involvement in the decision makings. These ultimately access the women's presentation in social space, participation in extra-familial groups, social networks and enhance their representation of women in various spheres. This may enhance the women's participation in community mobilizations, campaigning for rights and awareness, involvement in local politics and representation in local bodies.

#### iii) Social Status and Well Beings

Social status and well beings are also vital components of empowerment. When a person feels self-esteem, self-efficiency and psychological well-beings then s/he enjoys the freedom and feels valued. In this sense, when women participates in cooperatives she can experience the sense of inclusion and entitlement and free flow of acceptance of women by societies. Likewise, community or society will appreciate and desire the role and contribution of women and this ultimately builds up the confidence of women.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Women's status in various social and economical spheres is still disappointing. Economic situation of women in compared to male is very much disgusting and participation and representation of women in the public and private sector negligible. This situation has placed women's status in worst situation. Discrimination of women especially in the underdeveloped countries is institutionalized and systematic discrimination and subordination has bottlenecked the identity, autonomy, representation and voice of the women. So, women empowerment is a great challenge for the establishment of egalitarian and welfare world. That preserves and respects the equal right of women.

It is felt that, the seed of women empowerment should be sown from the grass-root level i.e., from the community level. In this respect, cooperatives which have emerged as local institutional mechanisms of economic development and social inclusion can be an effective technique for the women empowerment. Cooperatives could be an effective platform for the women that offer economic opportunities and political understanding. The big issue today we have is how to enhance the participation of women in the cooperatives. Participation should be more than counting the numbers of women; it should be about women having their voices and influences in the decision makings. Cooperatives can hold various activities for the empowerment of women members. Cooperatives are based on the principle 'Information, Training and Education', so it can be expected that cooperatives can empower women through information, training and education too.

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