
Research Papers



WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT APPROACH TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract:

Development is considered as a human right and also as freedom. Democracy which is based on freedom (and actual execution of such freedom and not merely book entries about freedom) would necessarily ensure the human rights also. It further requires that women should also have rights to actively participate in the process of economic development independently. Women's Human Rights Approach expresses that if any social, political or religious constraints are against it, women can demand legal protection to remove such anarchy and oppression. Obviously, condition of women is yet to improve in India, as they still suffer from disparity in terms of education, employment and participation in country's development process. The attitudes of people towards women are affected by traditional socio-religious factors, people believe that educating women or allowing them to move freely in public engulf the nation in sexual anarchy, destroy the family and brings dishonor to the society. Such existing facts of Indian society restrict the women's emancipation as well as the process of economic development. Public expenditure on education and health is far lower compared to developed countries and other developing countries like Brazil and China. Obviously, India cannot accelerate the engine of development without improvement in human development parameters where women can play a key role.

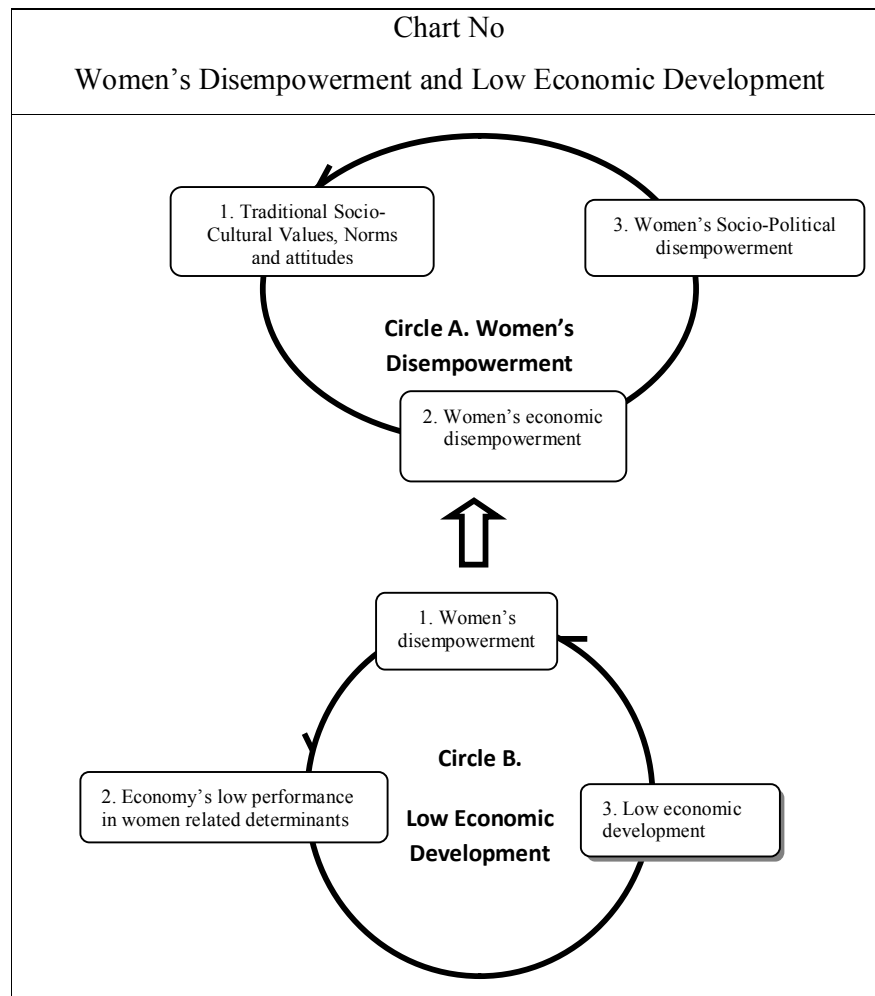
KEYWORDS : *Democracy , economic development , socio-religious factors.*

INTRODUCTION

Explanation of women's disempowerment i.e. low empowerment of women in various fields like economy, society and polity, is given in the chart number 1.1 The chart depicts how a vicious circle of women's disempowerment exists in an economy and affects adversely to the process of economic development.

Circles A i.e. women's disempowerment circle contains three parts. First part is of traditional, social and cultural values, norms, domination of patriarchal system etc. Second part is of Women's economic disempowerment which includes women's illiteracy, poor health condition, low work participation, low pay or no recognition of housework, low decision making power in economic affairs, no access of economic rights , low economic capabilities etc. The third part of the circle is socio-political disempowerment of women which denotes women's low participation in socio-political decision making agencies, low decision making power, low access to socio-political rights, low organizational power, low representation of women in political agencies etc.

Circle B is explaining Low Economic Development caused by women's disempowerment. It also contains three parts: First Part reveals the women's disempowerment as explained above. Second part describes Economy's low performance in women related determinants of economic development as shown in the table no.1.1. Third part explains because of low improvement in women related indicators of economic development economy shows low level performance in economic development.



We know that most of socio-religious and traditional factors are adversely affecting the process of women's emancipation or women's empowerment. Hence, women are remaining underprivileged. Various studies have proved that it is the traditional system which prevented women to be empowered equal to men by setting up various social and religious norms. Existence of these traditional norms and customs in the society works against the process of women's empowerment, and keeps women in disempowered condition. These norms of feudal society reject women's economic rights to survive. Earning by working like men was not a common phenomenon in feudal society. Access to money and its use according to women's choices was strongly restricted in the feudal society. Three saviors or protectors are well known in Indian history: Parents, Husband and Son. This should be an exaggeration if we say that it is true even today. To survive there is need to have control over economic resources. Those women denied access to these resources or those who were not supported by three saviors were forced to become open prostitutes or religious slaves. Exploiting women for economic purposes was a characteristic of feudal society. Various social and religious norms were set to support this exploitation. Unfortunately, most of them have been continued - directly or indirectly- in the Indian societies; be it Muslims, Hindus, Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes.

Nasty Influence of these traditional Socio- Cultural Values, Norms and attitudes actually prevent women from acquiring high economic capabilities and economic power and force them to be disempowered.

In sum, this traditional social set up keeps women economically disempowered, and this economic disempowerment of women further leads to socio-political disempowerment. If women are handicapped to exercise their human rights in social and political agencies where formal and informal

decisions regarding women's development are taken by authorities, they may not be able to change the traditional social set up. Hence, economic disempowerment of women forces them to be socio-politically disempowered. Further, socio-political disempowerment can not help to change traditional set up, and this traditional set up keeps women economically disempowered. In this fashion, the vicious circle of women's disempowerment is working in underdeveloped economy of India or in backward societies.

As shown in the Circle B, Lack of women's empowerment leads to economy's poor performance in various important variables of economic development. At grassroots level, it affects severely: poor sanitation, illiteracy, low income and savings level, high infant mortality and maternal mortality are the areas of concern. Therefore, Women's empowerment influenced indicators of economic development show slow progress. It affects adversely overall country's economic development. Further, low economic development or backwardness in economic front or slow economic development with high economic disparity indirectly works against women's empowerment. This disempowerment of half of the country's population can not allow the economy to achieve speedy economic development.

In sum, disempowerment of women is a crucial cause of low economic development, and further low economic development can not create suitable climate for empowerment of women in various fields. This is the way, circle B works in a poor economy.

In another words, as stated in Human Development Report, neither a country nor a community can achieve improvement in Human Development Index (HDI) without achieving positive results in indices like Gender Empowerment Measures (GEM), Women Empowerment Index (WEI) and Human Poverty Index (HPI).

To break this vicious circle, women's active role in three spheres of human development- social, political and most importantly economic- must be considered while making various development policies. But breaking vicious circle of women's disempowerment can be started by promoting women's economic empowerment. Various present studies on Self Help Groups and Micro Finance Agencies in Bangladesh and India have witnessed that women's economic empowerment works as the fuel for their entire empowerment by educating them and organizing them. Once this elimination of women's disempowerment is started, it will, further, accelerate country's economic development. Therefore, breaking A circle is helping break B circle. Hence women empowerment works as a vital and one of the central tools of development.

We conclude that without women's empowerment the process of economic development becomes slow; therefore, economy cannot secure fast economic development. Again, low economic development keeps women oppressed in various spheres so entire situation becomes unsupportive to their empowerment. Women's disempowerment cannot make any suitable changes in socio cultural factors, which are keeping low status of women. According to Mira Seth, "... the main strategy for women's development is three folds – education, employment and health. For the first should be considered that economic independence would accelerate improvement in women's status..." Policies regarding modern education for women are the essential first step towards women's empowerment. Empowerment must be: Economic- where a woman has the ability to acquire capital and the strength to decide wants to use it; Political-whereby a woman can assert her basic rights in decision making and Social-where a woman is given space for herself. Society must understand women and then empower them in true perspective. Most significant changes occurred in early 1980's when in 7th Five Years Plan Women and Child welfare Department was established. Indian Govt. has been launched welfare programmes for women. However, there is a necessity of combine attempts of NGOs and government to ensure people's participation to women's empowerment. This is an essential prerequisite to achieve equity and development.

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