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## EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN: AN OVERVIEW

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### ABSTRACT:

The word empowerment is widely used in relation to women, very often it is used as a substitute for women's welfare, development of women, upliftment of women, participation and conscientisation of women. But the concept of empowerment is not synonymous to these words. It is something of a more and broader concept.

**KEYWORDS** – women's welfare, development of women , participation and conscientisation of women.

### INTRODUCTION

"The terminology of empowerment has arisen from the theoretical debates as well as practical debates especially from the experience of women working at the grassroots level in many parts of the world".

The dictionary meaning of the term empowerment is to give power, to give them capacity to perform some physical or mental activity, to delegate authority, to give legal rights, to enable, to entitle, to endow.

### THE CONCEPT OF POWER

The literary meaning of empowerment indicates that it is centered around the root concept of power. Then Power is the ability of one person or get another person or group to do something against their will. Power in relation to social economic and political aspects indicates control over resources and decision making. The exercise of power by one over the other leads to determine the perception, preferences, choices of a group.

Jo Rowlands has identified four different forms of power;

- Power over --- Control or influence over others, instrumentation of domination.
- Power to ---A generative or productive power which creates new possibilities and actions without domination.
- Power with ---A sense of the whole being greater than the sum of the individuals, especially when a group tackles problems together.
- Power from within --- The spiritual strength and uniqueness that reside in each one of us and makes us truly human. Its basis is self-acceptance and self-respect which extend in turn, respect for acceptance of others as equals.



### The Concept of Empowerment

Indicators of empowerment should encompass personal, social, economic and political change.

The components of empowerment are:

- Women's and men's sense of internal strength and confidence to face life.

- The right to make choices.
- The power to control their own lives within and outside the home.
- The ability to influence the direction of social change towards the creation of more just social and economic order nationally and internationally.

Empowerment in two ways. One is empowerment in general in relation to the poor or those who are powerless. Second one is the empowerment of women. "For the first time Paulo Freire mentioned the term empowerment in his theories by using 'conscientisation' a process by which poor could challenge the structure of power and take control of their lives. But he ignored gender aspect to empower and expand the Freirian's empowerment analysis".

People from different fields define empowerment in different ways. Policymakers, development-planners, activists, researchers and aid agencies have tried to define it by emphasizing on different aspects. According to Hapke Holly M empowerment is "access to and control over productive resources, knowledge and awareness of one's self and society's personal needs, health issues, legal rights technological innovations and the availability of social and economic resources, how to take advantage of them, self-image, i.e, realisation of one's capabilities and the potential and confidence to take action in one's life are the components of empowerment".

On whatever way empowerment is defined and understood it has limitations since it is related to status 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

From a feminist perspective, 'power over' entails understanding the dynamics of operation and internalised operation. Empowerment is thus more than participation in decision making ; it must also include process that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions. The feminist understanding of empowerment includes 'power to' and 'power from within'.

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 location ; out of an individual's place in the life cycle, specific life experience and out of the interaction of all the above with gender relations prevailing in society".

According to the national policy of education, Government of India[1986] women become empowerment through collective reflection and decision making. Its parameters are building a positive self-image and self-confidence, developing the ability to think critically , building up group cohesion and fostering decision making and action, change, encouraging group action in order to bring about change in the society, providing the economic independence".

India's draft paper for the Fourth world women's conference while emphasising on empowerment of women underlines the need to redraw the development plan from women's perspective. It called for affirmative discrimination in favour of women in order to empower them economically and politically. Naila Kabir defines women's empowerment as " a process where by women become able to organise themselves to increase their own self-reliance, to assert their independent right, to make choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination". For individual empowerment, women must be conscious towards herself, and her rights, her potentialities, and be aware of what is happening to her and the factors which are acting for and against her, since it is the woman who is benefitted if she is empowered, initiation and demand must come from her regarding what she wants and how to get it.

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. Then automatically they will

choose their choices on their own. Education is one of the choices, women must be made aware of the importance of education and choices in the forms of education that is made available; opportunities must be given and then any are own make the best use of the choices.

The empowerment process is one where women find time and space for their own and begin to re-examine their life critically and collectively. Double burden and drudgery of work should be reduced to and let them have their time to think about themselves and observe the thing is happening around them.

### The Process of Women's Empowerment in India's Development Policies

In The Indian context concerned 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's population comes below the poverty line, the concentration was more on rural and poor women. The first step in empowerment women was organising them at grass root level by establishing mahila mandals.

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. Similarly in the health field health programmes that were adopted to reduce maternal mortality rate, infant mortality rate, to improve the nutrition level of pregnant and lactating mothers and children.

In order to increase poor 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 1980's by adopting various policies like education policy, nutrition policy and amendments in various acts related to women.

The organisational 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, DWCR, WDP in Rajasthan awareness generation programmes of the central social welfare Board and the Mahila Samakhy Project of Ministry of human resource development to empower women at grass root levels through their own organization. Whereas non-governmental organisation by organising women at grass root level through self-help groups, organising awareness programme, training in skill development are providing income generating activities.

Besides, the role of women's movement in empowering women through creating awareness, resisting injustice done to women, organising women, protecting women's rights, finding and solving women's problem cannot be neglected.

### Principles of Women's Empowerment

- **Self-awareness:** Awareness of their living conditions, knowledge of what is happening around them its effects on them, through education, collective self-enquiry and reflection creates social awareness among people.
- **Self-reliance:** One becomes self-reliant by acquiring material and mental strength. Control over material resources and acquiring mental strength through solidarity, sharing, and caring for each other and working together makes a person a self-reliant.
- **Contact with world:** Empowerment could be achieved by having contact with outside world through markets, institutions, organizations, policy makers, officials and politicians. This could enable them to create time and space for themselves.

- **Building Skills and capacity:** To build skills to become productive and economically independent. Women must cultivate capacity to work in a group and play different roles to participate in the process of development by involving in planning, executing and monitoring the activities of development.
- **Collectivisation and organisation:** The core principle on which the empowerment is based on bringing women with common cause together and organise them to develop a feeling of strength among themselves. This collectivization and organisation increase their bargaining power to show resistance, to solve problems, pooling and sharing of resources, skills, experience, time and space at mutual support etc.
- **Women and development (WAD)**
- The second approach is 'women and development' (WAD). This approach concentrates on the inequalities existing between development and undeveloped countries within the development process. It attributes the nature of development as the cause of women's poverty, marginalization and inequality. The views of 'Development Alternates for Women in New Era' (DAWN) group may be considered as representative of the WAD approach. DAWN challenges the fundamental belief of development that increasing women's participation, improving their share in resources would bring dramatic changes in life of women. It tries to analyse the impact of development policies on women and advocates fundamental changes in the nature of development itself. According to them unless and until the relation based on equality exists between developed and less developed countries no real development can be activated. Policies and programmes based on WAD have not been found to be formulated. WAD by focusing on development process limits its analysis to their impact of development process on women.
- **Gender and Development (GAD)**
- The recognition of understanding and challenging the power relations that determine the status of women and men led to the emergence of new approach called 'Gender and Development' (GAD). 'Women's concern' was replaced by 'gender concerns'. Gender is the socialized and cultural identity of women and men in a given society. Social and cultural perception of masculine and feminine determine the gender. This concept of gender was introduced to analyse the subordination of women within the development process. The social relationship between men and women was considered more important in understanding women and development. GAD shifted the focus from 'women' to 'analyzing the relation between men and women'. The focus on 'gender' instead of 'women' helped to have holistic pictures of the situation i.e., not only to look at women who form the part of but also to look at women in relation to men and their relations which are socially constructed.
- According to GAD approach, questioning the power structure and gender relation that give rise to women's disadvantage is more important than talking about invisibility of women's work, their education and integration them into development. Sources of women's disadvantage like male superiority which shapes women's views of themselves and their capacities and the control men have over various resources and power have to be changed. Social structure which support women's disadvantage like religious and political institutions, existing laws, systems of thought and socialization practices must be removed.
- GAD assumes that in addition to social, economic, religious and political factors, gender relations influence the life of an individual and particularly women by imposing some constraints and denying some opportunities. So it is necessary to analyze how various factors interact with gender relations.
- Like many other structures of the society gender is also structured with inequality and hierarchy. It determines women's situation in different ways than that of men. GAD does not say that gender relations is the only powerful or principal determinant of women's situation. But it tries to analyze how

gender is related to and inter locked with other forms of social structures in determining the women's situation.

- 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 get what she/he wants, have 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 determines power can be called empowerment. When we apply this definition of power empowerment of women, it is clear that women do not have power (are 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 man is considered as bread winner, 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.
  - “Everyone needs empowerment at all levels. It involves gaining confidence 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 developing positive role models and facilitating the process of empowerment. It is to identify the real and the appropriate needs, encourage commitment, ensure sustainability and personal development, create self-esteem and enable them to share power.
- **The Process of Women's Empowerment**
  - The concept of empowerment is applicable to women as a whole but in different ways and dimensions to different groups according to the country, class, caste and the society they belong to. “The use of the concept of empowerment has greater relevance and application to “third world’ countries which are characterized by high levels of poverty, feminization of poverty, low female literacy, invisibility of women, strong patriarchal and community values.
  - The empowerment process in the First world is different from that of the Third world. It is more strategic i.e., changing patriarchal norms, gender division of labour, gaining equality and changing the attitudes of society towards women in the First world. While in the Third world it is more practical 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. 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 does not empower women unless strategic interests are fulfilled. Strategic interests are long term and common to almost all women. They are related to improving women's position. They include action to increase women's knowledge and skills, give them legal protection and provide equal opportunities and equal participation in decision making and greater access to resources etc. Strategic interests transform gender relations and empower women.
  - Women's empowerment implies individual as well as collective empowerment.
  - Jo Roland mentions three dimensions of empowerment. They are, Personal – developing a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity for undoing the effects of internalized oppression. Relational – development the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of a relationship and decisions made

within it. Collective – where individuals work together to achieve a more extensive impact than each could have had alone, collective action is based on co-operation rather than competition.

- Within the country especially in Third world countries the process of empowerment of poor women is different from that of the middle and the rich class. Poor women must be provided with basic needs, increase in their income, make them literate and involved in skill development to empower them. Changing the patriarchal values, gender division of labour, removal of social seclusion, economic independence, and gender sensitization are more appropriate to empower middle and rich women. Due to poverty, illiteracy and patriarchal values poor women cannot be empowered on their own. The empowerment process through external intervention is inevitable in the third world. Intervention comes through government, women's movement NGOs.
- Governments take the static approach by adopting policies and programmes to eradicate poverty, to provide education and increase income to ensure social service to empower women.
- In individual empowerment woman must be conscious of herself, her rights, her potentialities, aware of what is happening to her and factors which are acting for and against her. Since it is the women who is benefitted if she is empowered, initiation and demand must come from her regarding what she wants and how to get it.
- 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. Then automatically they will choose their choices on their own. 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.
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## CONCLUSION

The National Perspective plan for women identified some measures to empower women. They areas stated below:

- **Self-development or conscientisation:** Women should be enabled to realise their internal strength and develop capabilities to appropriately assist to effectively protect their interests on wherever they been threatened.
- **Access to authority:** They should be given a decisive position for the decision making process at all levels in the potential administrative economic and social sphere.
- **Support structure:** They should be providing with a network of support structure to counteract forces trying to frustrate their empowerment. support structure include involvement of NGOs, in providing economic help establishing psychological and social rehabilitation centre, providing legal aid, protection for atrocity victims , setting up of statutory committees to look into grievances of women etc.
- The plan also suggested that the struggle for empowerment of women should go in hand with other struggles for poor, deprived, disadvantaged and oppressed sectors. In order to empower women collectively women first have to overcome various conflicts and contradictions which not only break the unity among women but also divide them on caste, minority, religion, and class basis.
- 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.
- 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, recongnise 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.

- In the second stage they try to change the situation, and structure which are against to them. They not only point out the injustice done to them but also resist them. Here they got support and strength from collective action.
- Collective empowerment of women would shift the direction and process of development to women's needs and their demand. It would bring with it the individual empowerment of women not merely for individual advancement but for the advancement of society as a whole.
- 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.
- Women's empowerment can only be achieved through integrated and synergetic thinking and action.
- While empowering women an effort may be biased in favour of 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 enhance their ability to make choices within the family and in the society.

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