



## WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: PARADIGMS AND STRATEGIES

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### ABSTRACT

Women's empowerment constitutes a central pillar for achieving sustainable social, economic, and cultural development in India. The perception and representation of women in Indian society reflect a complex interplay of tradition and modernity, spanning from historically revered figures to contemporary leaders in diverse domains. Despite significant progress, entrenched gender stereotypes—such as the confinement of women to domestic roles, perceptions of emotional fragility, and appearance-based judgments—continue to constrain their participation and advancement. This paper critically examines the evolving image of women in India, interrogates persistent gender-based stereotypes, and evaluates governmental as well as community-level measures aimed at promoting gender equality. Through an analysis of legislative reforms, educational initiatives, economic empowerment schemes, and socio-cultural interventions, the study identifies both achievements and remaining challenges. The research aims to offer a comprehensive perspective on strategies for dismantling discriminatory practices and fostering an environment where women's agency, identity, and choices are fully respected and realized.



**KEYWORDS :** Women's empowerment, India, gender stereotypes, legislative measures, social reform, gender equality.

### INTRODUCTION

Pandit Nehru said that in order to awaken people it is the women who have to be awakened . Once they are on the moves, the household moves, the village moves, the country moves

For the advancement in the economic, social, political and cultural fronts, for the conversion of tradition bound society into a modern one ,nothing short of pervasive social transformation will suffice. A whole metamorphosis of habits, wrenching, re orientation of values and weaving and reweaving of fabric of daily existence is necessary.

To begin with we need to make a distinction between the condition and position of women. Condition may be defined as the material state in which poor women live- low wages ,poor nutrition, lack of access to health care, education and training. Position is the social and economic status of women as compared with that of men. It is not enough to improve the condition of women- it is required- but more important is to help them to act against the less visible but powerful underlying structure of subordination and inequality.



The dictionary meaning of the term empowerment is to give power to give capacity to perform, to delegate authority to give legal rights, to enable, to entitle, to endow. The process of gaining control over resources and self which determines power can be called empowerment. From this one may infer that women do not have power or are powerless since that do not have control over resources. Even if they have, it is marginal and that too over some resources. This power is limited by patriarchal norms, customs, tradition and social values imposed on them..

The concept of women empowerment is not a matter of striving to get a greater share in the existing system. It is the struggle against the system which works fundamentally against the interest of women. A program which aims at women's empowerment needs to create and strengthen sisterhood and to promote overall nurturing, caring and gentleness. Beijing conference 1995 had identified certain quantitative and qualitative indicators of women empowerment.

### QUALITATIVE INDICATORS

- Increase in self esteem individual and collective confidence
- increase in articulation knowledge and awareness on health nutrition reproduction rights law and literacy
- Increase and decrease in personal leisure time and time for child care.
- Increase and decrease of workload in new programs
- Change in roles and responsibilities in family and community
- Decrease in violence on women and girls
- change in social customs like child marriage dowry discrimination against widows
- visible changes in women's participation level attending meeting participating and demanding participation
- increasing bargaining and negotiating power at home and in community
- increase access to and ability to get the information
- formation of women collective
- positive changes in social attitudes
- awareness and recognition of women's economic contribution in and outside the household
- women's decision making over her work and income.

### Quantitative indicators:

1. Demographic trends( Study of human population such a size, growth)
  - Maternal mortality rate
  - sex ratio
  - average age of marriage
2. Number of women participating in different development programmes
3. Greater access and control over community resources, government schemes ,and non-formal education.
4. Visible change in Physical health status and nutritional level
5. Change in literacy and enrollment levels
6. Participation of women in the political process.



John Snow, Inc. define empowerment in a behavioral sense as the ability to take effective action.

| Domain   | Expression   |
|--|--|
| sense of self and vision of future                   | assertiveness, plans for the future, future oriented action ,relative freedom from threats of physical violence, awareness of own problems and options actions indicating sense of security. |
| mobility and visibility                              | Activities outside the home relative freedom from harassment at public spaces interaction with men   |
| economics security                                   | Property ownership ,new skills knowledge and increased income, engaged in new /traditional types of work   |
| status and session making power within the household | Self confidence controlling spending money and enhanced status in the family   |
| ability to interact effectively in public sphere     | Awareness of legal status and services available availability to get access to social service political awareness  |
| participation on non family groups                   | identified as a person outside the family ,self expression and articulation of problem ,participating in a group with autonomous structure   |

The image of a woman in Indian society arouses mixed and yet intensely complex feelings of ambivalence. For the ordinary rural male, show of contempt or pity at the mention of a woman is the expected form of behaviour. He would even relish denigrating her by calling her in rural parlance, "a shoe of my left foot; the more sophisticated male regards her as unreliable, cunning, sly, cold blooded, deceitful like a snake etc. To the elderly male, she is an inferior or weak creature for whom he instantly plays the role of guardian. For the youth, she is an object of curiosity to be explored, teased, molested and even raped if the opportunity permits.

As one begins to comprehend Indian social reality one is appalled by the prevalence magnitude frequency of female foeticide maternal mortality prostitution child marriage domestic violence and sexual harassment in public sphere. There is no end to such harrowing incidents in India where gender attitude remain stockingly primitive patriarchal feudal barbaric and oppressive. The following stereotyping instances inform us that there is a wide gulf between the rhetoric and reality .

- Let us begin with the issue of murder in the womb. The practice of female foeticide is rising at an appalling rate posing a serious threat to societies healthy sex ratio. According to data released by the centre for social research New Delhi 1 in every 25 girl children is killed in India. The sample registration survey of registrar general of the census states that the Infant mortality rate for the girl child is about 61 for 1000 live births as compared to 56 for boys. Moreover it is also reported that 10 million female fetuses have been aborted in India over the last two decades. Paradoxically it is high among educated mothers. It appears development and prevention of foeticide are not always positively correlated. Integral to the issue of female foeticide is the menace of son-stroke suffering whereby a woman in patriarchal milieu is continually harassed for her failure to beget a male child.



- Second is the issue of maternal mortality. Every 5th woman in the world who is dying of poor medical care during childbirth, resides in India. Of every one lakh childbirths in India there are 440 maternal deaths compared to 10 in USA. In addition it is also reported that in India one woman dies every 7 minutes during childbirth. Shockingly India alone accounted for a quarter of world wide maternal death in the year 2000.
- Child marriage represents another grim reality in India. 45% of Indian women are still being forced into child marriage before the age of 18 years. As the National family health survey puts it 46.03% of girls are married before they turn 18 in Karnataka.
- Prostitution is another menace that proliferates despite the prevalence of plethora of laws to check it. Studies reveal that around 4.5 lakh women and children are trafficked in Asia Pacific region every year. As it is said Goa, Kerala and Tamilnadu used to be the places often visited by tourists in search of child sex. One learns from National dailies that the Mewat belt stretching from Alwar to Faridabad is full of such stories. Every third woman in the country faces domestic violence. And the situation across the globe is not much different. Efficiently husbands and intimate partners and the main perpetrators. That is why such violence remains largely hidden. Although the Government of India must be complemented for enacting the protection of women from domestic violence act 2005, it is very difficult to predict that it will actually encourage women to come forward and speak against their husbands and intimate partners in the court of law.
- The public sphere is increasingly becoming a terribly unsafe place for women, be it public transport for the workplace. Delhi Police survey on women safety reveals that buses are unsafe for women. About 45% of all cases of eve teasing and molestation takes place on the city's infamous fleet of public transport (Bagga 2006). Even the situation in places of teaching learning is no different. It is no more premature to propose that such cases reveal just a tip of the Iceberg. This grim reality suggests that women's question is in a terribly precarious condition that warrants critical engagement from all quarters- administrators, activists, professional policy makers, academicians and social workers.

## MEASURES UNDERTAKEN BY INDIAN GOVERNMENT

### Economic Empowerment of Women:

- **Poverty eradication:** Steps will be taken to offer the economic and social options with necessary support measures to enhance their capabilities.
- **Micro credit** establishment of new and strengthening of existing micro credit mechanisms and micro finance institutions will be undertaken so that the outreach of the credit is enhanced.
- **Women and agriculture-** includes training women in soil conservation, dairy development and other occupations allied to agriculture like horticulture, livestock etc will be expanded to benefit women workers in the agriculture sector.
- **Women and industry-** Suitable measures will be taken to enable women to work the night shift in factories and also provide support services for security, transportation etc.

### Social empowerment of women

- **Education:** Special measures will be taken to eliminate discrimination universalise education eradicate illiteracy create a gender sensitive educational system increase enrollment and retention rates of girls and improve the quality of education to facilitate life long learning as well as development of occupation vocation technical skills by women with a special focus on girls and women particularly those belonging to weaker section.
- **Health:** measures will be adopted to take into account the reproductive rights of women and their vulnerability to sexual and health problems together with endemic infectious and communicable diseases such as Malaria TB and water borne diseases. The social development and health



consequences of HIV AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases will be tackled from a gender perspective

- **Nutrition:** In view of the high risk of malnutrition and diseases that women face at all the three critical stages- infancy, childhood and adolescence and reproductive phase, focused attention should be paid.
- **Drinking water and sanitation:** Special attention will be given to the needs of women in provision of safe drinking water sewage disposal, toilet facilities, sanitation within accessible reach of households especially in rural areas and urban slums.
- **Housing and shelter:** special attention will be given for providing adequate and safe housing and accommodation for women including single women, heads of households ,working women, students etc.
- **Environment:** Women will be involved in spreading the use of solar energy biogas smokeless *chullas* etc.
- **Science and Technology:** Efforts to develop appropriate technology suited to women's needs as well as to reduce the drudgery will be given a special focus.
- **Women in difficult circumstances:** Measures to provide special assistance to women in extreme poverty, destitute women ,women in conflict situations, women affected by natural calamities and many more.
- **Violence against women:** all forms of violence against women- physical and mental whether at domestic or societal level should be dealt with effectively.
- **Rights of girl child:** Special Emphasis relating to food nutrition health education vocational education and eliminating child labour will be a special focus.

#### Political legal empowerment of women

- legal judicial system :Legal judicial system would be made more responsive and gender sensitive to women's needs especially in cases of domestic violence and personal assault .NPEW aims to encourage changes in personal laws such as those related to marriage divorce maintenance and guardianship so as to eliminate discrimination against women.
- Decision making: women's equality in power sharing and active participation in decision making including decision making in political process at all levels would be ensured.
- Main streaming a gender perspective in the development process :Issues and concerns related to women would be specially addressed and reflected in all concerned laws, policies , plans and programs of action.

#### Major programs for women empowerment run by MWCD :

1. Swayam Siddha: this is a flagship scheme for women for Holistic economic empowerment through self help groups
2. Support for training and employment program(STEP) : It aims to raise the income of rural women by updating their skills and knowledge .Working women hostels and creches:Under this scheme financial assistance is provided to NGOs Cooperative bodies and other Agencies for construction and renting of buildings for working women hostels.
3. Short stay homes and swadhar for women and girls under implementation since 1969 to protect and rehabilitate women for girls in social and moral danger due to exploitation
4. Rashtriya Mahila kosh( RMK) is a national level mechanism to meet the micro credit needs of the poor and asset less women.
5. Swashakti project aims to bring out social economic development and empowerment of the women through promotion of women self help groups, micro credit and income generating activities.



6. Swavlamban program provides training and skills to women to facilitate them to obtain employment and self employment.
7. Swadhar provide relief and Rehabilitation to women in difficult circumstances
8. Central social welfare board works for the Welfare and development of women and children
9. Integrated Child Development Scheme has more than 6 lakh anganbadi centres ,day Care Centres for working and ailing mothers.
10. Kishori Shakti Yojana aims at improving the well being of adolescent girls.
11. Balika Samriddhi Yojana was launched to improve the status of girl belonging to BPL groups
12. Three national plans of action for children- the national policy for children 1974, National charter for children 1992, National Commission for children 1992, have brought positive changes in crucial indicators like child mortality rate, school enrollment mint and level of malnutrition in children with special focus on girl child.

There is no doubt that during the last several years, some serious efforts have been made by the state to make the constitutional dreams a reality and to bring women out of the kitchen and the home into the main stream of social economic life of the country. Over the years women have played a dynamic role in all fields of life in post independence India. They have made their entry into civil services and other professions in large numbers and are showing their talent and contributing to nation building activities. There are lady ministers lady parliamentarian lady pilots lady doctors lady social workers lady drivers lady astrologers and what not. But the fact remains that women in India still suffer in practice from a number of disabilities.

Government policies can only facilitate the process, reduce the hurdles and create an atmosphere conducive to transformation. But it is the women who have to educate and empower themselves. Unless they themselves become conscious of their oppression, show initiative and seize the opportunity it is not possible to change their status. Besides this the following measures if adopted in their true spirit will go a long way in uplifting the status.

- Right social values should be inculcated right from inception. Equal opportunities to both male and female children should be given. The life of a girl should not be regarded as a liability and inferior to a boy.
- Curriculum content harping on male chauvinism should be changed.
- Persons indulging in crime against women should be publicly condemned. The women should form Vigilance groups on an area basis which should look out for offenders among men and counter them not only physically but also socially by exposing them to public ridicule.
- Adult education centres both in rural and urban areas should not confined themselves nearly to the eradication of illiteracy but they should also work as powerful instruments for bringing about desired change in attitude of people towards female child, single unmarried girls ,widow remarriage, divorced women, small family irrespective of sex of the child to be accepted as a norm of life.
- Voluntary Organisation in general and women's organisations in particular should launch demonstrations in front of the house of such persons as are found guilty of harassing women in one way or the other.
- The employees found guilty of exploiting women should be given exemplary punishment.
- The media should focus on the potentialities and power of women. Success stories of women should be available through films and TV programs.
- As the stereotyped role of women is reduced to mere performance of daily domestic chores -one should change all this while facing the participation of men in household tasks.
- Urgent need for changing a particular type of value system which deteriorates the status of women. The ideal of *pativrata* is romanticised through legends; folklores must be changed immediately by changing the mind set of women at home. It is said, "it is the women who exercise the greatest



vigilance over the members of their own sex regarding the observation of norms rooted in tradition”.

- The UGC sponsored workshop conducted by Centre for women studies on capacity building of women managers in higher education must be broad based in terms of coverage and content. Coverage in the sense that it should encompass in general not the academic women alone. Content in the sense that the training module should carry vocational and economic value.

## CONCLUSION

The empowerment of women in India is both a constitutional mandate and a societal necessity for inclusive growth. While notable progress has been made through legislative reforms, targeted government programs, and increasing social awareness, deep-rooted stereotypes and structural inequalities continue to hinder women's full participation in public and private spheres. The analysis of the evolving image of women in India underscores the urgent need to challenge and dismantle cultural biases that limit opportunities. Sustainable empowerment requires a multi-pronged approach that combines robust legal frameworks, quality education, economic independence, and supportive societal attitudes. Equally essential is the role of families, communities, and institutions in fostering environments where women's aspirations are respected and nurtured. Achieving this vision will not only enhance gender equality but also contribute significantly to the nation's overall social and economic development, making empowerment not merely a policy directive but a lived reality for every woman.

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