

Women Empowerment : A Challenge of 21st Century

Concept Paper

For centuries women were not treated equal to men in many ways. They were not allowed to own property, they did not have a Share in the property of their parents, they had no voting rights, they had no freedom to choose their work or job and so on. Now that we have come out of those dark days of oppression of women there is a need for strong movement to fight for the rights of women and to ensure that they get all the rights which men have or in other words a movement for the Empowerment of Women. The present seminar has been planned with a view to discuss the various issues related to the Empowerment of Women and to suggest measures for achieving this end.

Empowerment –Conceptual Framework

The origins of the concept of empowerment go back to the civil rights movement in the USA in the 1960. It has since then been interpreted differently and filled with new meanings and is today used in such different sectors as business, social work, development discourse and by advocates of very different political agendas. The different definitions of empowerment range between defining it as a largely individual process of taking control of and responsibility for one's life and situation, and defining it as a political process of granting human rights and social justice to disadvantaged groups of people. At the former end of the continuum, where empowerment is defined largely as an individual process, empowerment can be used in the conservative political rhetoric of freeing the government of responsibility for injustices and for granting social security. Instead, the argument makes individuals and communities responsible for their own social security and welfare, without providing the necessary support and resources.

The empowerment of women is located within the discourse and agenda of gender equality and is increasingly being taken in the agendas of international development organizations, perhaps more as a means to achieve gender equality than as an end in itself.

At the Social Summit in Copenhagen in 1993 and the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo 1994 Governments committed themselves to the empowerment of women. This commitment was operationalised and formulated into a clear action plan at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing 1995 where Governments committed themselves to the “empowerment and advancement of women, including the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief, thus contributing to the moral, ethical, spiritual and intellectual needs of women and men, individually or in community with others and thereby guaranteeing them the possibility of realizing their full potential in society and shaping their lives in accordance with their own aspirations.”

Different Levels of Empowerment

In line with most theorists on empowerment the one has to view empowerment as taking place on different levels and that change on all levels is necessary if the empowerment of women is really to occur. We have to relate empowerment at three levels: empowerment on the individual, group, and societal/ community- level and the interaction between these.

The individual level deals with individual women's abilities to take control over their lives, their perceptions about their own value and abilities, their abilities to identify a goal and work towards this goal.

The group level deals with the collective action and sense of agency that woman experience together, in a group.

The societal level deals with the permissiveness of the political and social climate, the societal norms and the public discourse on what is possible and impossible for women to do, how women should behave etc.

The different levels are seen as interconnected and mutually reinforcing, e.g. when empowerment on individual level occurs, this will have effect on the group and societal level. Women who are empowered on an individual level will most likely go on and affect the other levels. Empowerment on a group level e.g. women organizing around a particular need is likely to have effect on the individual empowerment of the women in the form of increased self esteem and sense of agency.

Historical Background of Women Empowerment in India

The status of Women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millenium. In early Vedic period Women enjoyed equal status with men. Rigved & upnishads mention several names of women sages and seers notably Gargi & Maitrey. However later the status of women began to deteriorate approximately from 500 B.C., the situation worsened with invasion of Mughals and later on by European invaders.

Some reformatory movements by Guru Nanak, Jainism, Rajaram mohan Rai, Ishwarchandra Vidya Sagar, Pandita Rama Bai and others did give some relief. It is not that Britishers didn't do any thing for improving the condition of women. Some laws were enacted such an "Abolition of practice of Sati", Widow Remarriage Act 1856 etc.

The real change came after independence. Constitution of India guarantees equality to women (Article 14). There are other articles too which ensure rights of women e.g. no discrimination by the state [article15(1)] equality of opportunity (Article16) etc. Feminist activism picked up momentum in India during later 1970's. Later on Many groups and NGO's have been working for the Empowerment of women. We are proud that in India Women got voting right much before USA and some other European countries.

Steps Undertaken in India for Women Empowerment

The Constitution Framers were very much Conscious of the problem of women empowerment hence they ensured that the Principle of Gender Equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution in its Preamble, Fundamental duties and Directive Principles. The various articles mentioned in the earlier paragraph are meant for ensuring gender equality. Moreover the Constitution also empowers the states to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women.

The real impetus for this movement was gained when under the Priministership of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, a scheme known as Indira Mahila Yojana was launched, UNDP also incorporated issues of women upliftment as Primary objective. Various Schemes were later on launched for the empowerment of women such as Rashtriya Mahila Kosh, Mahila Samridhi Yojana, Self help groups at Panchayat level and many more. The establishment of National Women's Commission and State Women's Commissions were important milestones in the direction of Women Empowerment in India.

The National Policy for the Empowerment of women (2001) was an important step taken by the Government of the time for accelerating the pace of women empowerment. The policy was aimed at ensuring women empowerment through positive economic and social policies for the full development of women. So that they could realize their full potential. The policy assured equal access to women to health care, quality education, participation and decision making in Social, Political and Economical life of the nation.

The National Policy also aims at Strengthening legal system for eliminating discrimination against Women. It also visualizes strengthening partnership with Civil Society, particularly Women's organizations.

States have also taken various measures for empowerment of women.

Why is there still a Need For Women Empowerment ?

Inspite of the various measures taken up by the government after Independence and even during British rule the Women haven't been fully empowered. We may be proud of women in India occupying highest offices of President, Prime Minister, Lok Sabha Speaker, Leader of the Opposition or women like Ms. Chandra Kochar occupying highest positions in the Corporate Sector but the fact remains that we still witness dowry deaths, domestic violence and exploitation of women. The female foeticide is not an uncommon phenomenon.

The male female ratio though improved over last few years is still far from satisfactory. It is 940 women per 1000 men for India in some states it is as much lower as 877. These are the states where female foeticide is maximum. The female literacy rate is also lower than the male literacy rate.

The ground reality is deprivation, degraation and exploitation of women specially women from rural areas and those belonging to deprived sectors of the society. The Urban elite class women have no doubt been benefitted by the efforts of women empowerment. Dr. Dashrath Bhuyan in his article titled "Empowerment of Indian Women : A challenge of 21st century" writes "Women are being brutalized, Commodified, materialized and subjected to inhuman exploitation and discrimination" Inspite of reservation being granted to women in Panchayat elections after 73rd and 74th Constitution amendment, in many Panchayats the male Chavinism does not allow them to function independently.

Globalization

Globalization has presented new challenges for the realization of the goal of women's equality, the gender impact of which has not been systematically evaluated fully. However, from the micro-level studies that were commissioned by the Department of Women & Child Development, it is evident that there is a need for re-framing policies for access to employment and quality of employment. Benefits of the growing global economy have been unevenly distributed leading to wider economic disparities, the feminization of poverty, increased gender inequality through often deteriorating working conditions and unsafe working environment especially in the informal economy and rural areas. Strategies will be designed to enhance the capacity of women and empower them to meet the negative social and economic impacts, which may flow from the globalization process.

Social Empowerment of Women

Under the social empowerment of women steps need to be taken to improve the health status of women, reduce maternal mortality especially in the areas which do not have good medical facilities. A programme for checking the spread of sexually transmitted diseases like HIV / AIDS and infections / communicable diseases like T.B. need to be launched.

Women face high risk of malnutrition hence focussed attention would have to be given to meet the nutritional needs of women at all stages of their life cycle.

The problem in the country is serious about the women belonging to disadvantaged groups. They are the most exploited lot. The Social activist should keep a vigil on the atrocities committed on women belonging to weaker sections and help them to fight the legal battle for obtaining justice. Schemes need to be introduced for helping women who are victims of marital violence, who are deserted and those engaged in sex professions.

Awareness programmes need to be organised for creating awareness among women especially belonging to weaker sections about their rights.

Government has to be vigilant for ensuring that there is no discrimination against the girl child and her rights are protected. The social stigma like child marriage. Female foeticide, child abuse and child prostitution must be eradicated immediately.

Education and Women Empowerment

Education is a powerful tool of social transformation. Hence, education for Women has to be paid special attention. Greater access for women to education must be ensured in the educational system. Gender sensitivity must be developed. A watch has to be kept on drop out rate of girls and corrective measures should be taken to check the drop out rates.

Role of NGO's in Women Empowerment

Governmental Organizations are formal agencies working for the empowerment of women. But this work requires multidimensional approach and hence a large number of voluntary organizations / NGO's have gained increased attention in the field from grass – root level to national & international level. Their role is so impressive because they work with missionary zeal and commitment. The working style of NGO's is open, transparent and personal. So, they are more effective in this direction. They organize seminars, conferences and workshops for the awakening of the masses. Their mass appeal – style contributes to a better understanding of women's rights and of the means to ensure the enjoyment of those rights and the elimination of discrimination. They prepare urban and rural uneducated women for self – employment, which is vital for the economic empowerment of the women. In short, all these programs and functions of NGO's contribute towards the realization of sustainable community development and hence women empowerment.

Role of International Agencies : for Women Empowerment

Promotion of equality between women & men and the empowerment of women is central to the work of United Nations. The UN actively promotes women's human rights and works to eradicate, discourage of violence against women, including in armed conflict and through trafficking. There are various UN agencies working for the empowerment of women like The Commission on the Status of women, The Committee on the elimination of discrimination against women, The Division for the advancement of women, The United Nations Development Fund for women, and recently, the UN Women association is formed which co-ordinates the activities of all the former UN agencies. These international agencies work to ensure that women have a real voice in all governance institutions, from the judiciary to the civil service, as well as in the private sector and civil society. So they can participate equally with men in public dialogue and decision- making and influence the decisions that will determine the future of their families and countries.

Conclusion

The Empowerment of women has become one of the most important Concerns of 21st century not only at national level but also at the international level. Efforts by the Govt. are on to ensure Gender equality but Government initiatives alone would not be sufficient to achieve this goal. Society must take initiative to create a climate in which there is no gender discrimination and Women have full opportunities of Self decision making and participating in the Social, Political and Economic life of the Country with a sense of equality. Then only the Vedic verse यत्र नारी पूज्यन्ते रमन्ते तत्र देवता (Wherever Women is respected, God resides there) would come true.

Sub Themes for The Seminar

1. Concept of women empowerment
2. Historical & Sociological dimensions of the issue of Women Empowerment
3. Role of education in Women Empowerment
4. Need for Women Empowerment in modern context
5. Measures for ensuring women empowerment
6. Hurdles in achieving women empowerment