



## Women Empowerment:

*The Status in India*

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**Abstract:** Empowering women is one of the central issues in sustainable development for many nations around the globe. Worldwide, governments and organizations strive to increase women's empowerment, as gender inequality is widespread in all cultures. India is a land of customs and traditions. Women and girls have been treated as inferior to men and boys yet; following the local and international calls for women's independence, the government of India has a voice to say in favor of women's rights and gender equality. The government of India has initiated many programs and schemes during the last few decades to uplift the status of women and encourage them to effectively participate in the country's sustainable development. The policy of women's empowerment is incorporated well into the constitution of India and became effective in the year 1950. The government of India has realized that women's empowerment has led to increased investments in children's education and health, and reduced household poverty.

**KEYWORDS:** Women Rights, Women Empowerment. Gender Equality.

### Introduction

Throughout history, women and girls have made an extraordinary contribution to their societies although they have been inferior to men and girls. The 20th century has been experiencing several socioeconomic, demographic, and cultural changes and transformations. These changes constituted evolution in gender relationships and led to greater equality. The recent calls for investment in women and girls supported global progress in narrowing gender gaps. Gender equality thoughts, feminist consciousness-raising, women's rights organizations, and all other realizations of women and girls' importance in the reduction of the burden on men and boys and the development of societies have led to the empowerment of women.

Women's empowerment is currently a prevailing development concern and has become an international agenda (Pagare, 2017; Cornwall, 2016). It is at the top of agendas across the globe and an important-on-the-table topic of modern societies in their discussions and debates on development and economics. Women's empowerment and gender equality have an impact on achieving sustainable development in the countries (Bayeh, 2016).

India is an agricultural-based nation and is a land of customs, traditions, and social practices. Although attempts to keep pace with modern countries, the issue of women empowerment in rustic India is still to worry about at the public as well as worldwide level. Even though it has a long way to go, the movement has significantly progressed. Women and girls have already started to stand up on their own feet, trying to occupy men-centric practices. Activating the newly updated agendas and policies towards women's rights, the government is purposefully attempting to eliminate different predispositions by opening

doors for women and girls to get opportunities for effective participation in their societies. For instance, the government of India has recently ordered a few women explicit executions to protect women and girls against such practices as social segregation, savagery, and abominations.

## Women's Empowerment: The Concept

Although women's empowerment has attracted attention (Hunt & Samman, 2016) and become central to recognizing women's rights and gender equality (Un Women, 2018), no universal definition has been given to this term. Women's empowerment is defined in several ways focussing on women's and girls' control of their lives and their participation in developing countries and societies. Empowerment encompasses processes of enhancing the prestige of women and girls through education, literacy, and raising awareness (Bayeh (2016).

Generally, Page and Czuba (1999) refer to the empowerment of women as a multi-dimensional social process.<sup>1</sup> This process assists people to control their lives, communities, and society. Batliwala (2014) called for a comprehensible definition of the term 'empowerment', and not confusing it with the term 'power'. According to her, 'power' refers to the control over material assets, intellectual resources, and ideology, whereas empowerment is the process of challenging existing power relations and of gaining greater control over the sources of power. In this scene, empowerment is about power, and in favor of people who exercise little power over their lives. Alsop, Heinsohn & Somma (2005) define empowerment as:

‘the process of enhancing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Central to this process are actions, which both build individual and collective assets and improve the efficiency and fairness of the organizational and institutional context, which govern the use of these assets.’

Women's empowerment, first and foremost, indicates the autonomy of women and girls, and the ability to control self, intellectual, financial, and physical resources as well as to control over ideology such as attitudes, beliefs, and values. Controlling over resources and ideology identifies the empowerment of women and equips them to be self-reliant, well-educated, economically independent, an effective decision-making authority, and a positive participants in the sustainable development activities of the community. Such practices make women and girls no more inferior to men and boys, in contrast, they articulate the proper equality that women worldwide are calling for. Women's empowerment builds a sense of self-confidence and removes any sort of segregation on the promise of sex inclination (Sharma, 2016).

In short, women's empowerment is the process of treating women and girls the same as men and boys in all fields of society. Empowerment of women means enabling women and girls to survive and live with respect, self-esteem, dignity, and humanity. We can define women's empowerment as the process through which women and girls can express themselves and show their capabilities to do whatever is possible for them in situations where they have been constrained. It is the process by which women and girls are given chance to participate in society's ongoing development. This definition is very closely related to Mosedale's definition (' women's empowerment is the process by which women redefine and extend what is possible for them to be and do in situations where they have been restricted, compared to men, from being and doing' (Mosedale, 2005, p. 252).

## Women's Empowerment: The Developmental History

The concept of empowerment is traced back to civil rights in the United States of America in 1960. Since the mid-1980s (Kumari, 2017), and through the feminist conceptual work in the 80s and 90s (Cornwall, 2016), the term empowerment has been widely held in the field of societal development. Women and girls were in reference and efforts have been made to use their potential and invest in their capabilities to gain a better life. According to Mosedale (2005) and Bidnath (2001), women's empowerment was evoked by the organizations that supported women in the 1970s where these organizations were 'explicitly used to frame and facilitate the struggle for social justice and women's equality through a transformation of economic, social and political structures at national and international levels. The writings on women's rights and feminism can be summarized in three main facts about women's empowerment in contemporary mainstream development. First, empowerment is basically about changing power relations. It involves building critical consciousness, and the way people see their lives and experience their world. Second,

empowerment is rational, seeking opportunities for both men and women to do their duties in their societies based on each capability and potential. Third, empowerment is a temporary process; not a fixed state. Policies on women's empowerment can be changed according to the emerging situations and the status and orality of the targeted society.

India is an agriculture-based country and a land of customs and traditions. Many social practices have been developed through centuries and have become the consciousness of Indian society. For a long time, women and girls have been inferior to men and boys, and their work restricted to houses holding. Although the constitution of India grants equal rights to both men and women, gender inequality still exists in some urban and rural areas of India.

The empowerment of women in India has a long history. The objectives were to strengthen legal systems and eliminate all forms of discrimination against women. Social reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda, Acharya Vinobha Bhave, and Ishwar Chandra eliminated practices like Sati and child marriage and they called for raising women and girls' voices in India. According to Bhadran (2022), The Indian National Congress is one of the first political parties in India that raised their voice to demand political rights for women in the year 1917.

However, women's empowerment policies became effective in the 1950s following the worldwide women's empowerment revolution. The government of India has redefined some political articles related to women and girls' rights such as ensuring the right to equality, prohibiting gender discrimination, and taking affirmative steps in favor of women and girls. Since then, some specific laws including The Equal Remuneration Act of 1976, The Maternity Benefit Act of 1961, and The Sexual Harassment of Women at Work Place in 2013 were sanctioned by the Indian Parliament.

In India, female Goddesses are worshipped and respect for mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives is given considerable importance by the society. However, at the same time, no one cannot ignore the dwelling of the patriarchal system and male superiority. The principles of gender equality are protected in the Constitution of India. The Government of India has developed many programs that supported the equality and empowerment of women during the last few decades. These programs and schemes were listed by Goyal (2019) and summarized as follows:

- *Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA) (1982-83)*: the program aimed at improving the socio-economic status of the poor women in the rural areas through creation of groups of women for income-generating activities on a self-sustaining basis.
- *Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB) (1953)*: the aim was to promote social welfare activities and implementing welfare programs for women and children through voluntary organizations.
- *Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK) is also known as the National Credit Fund for Women (NCFW) (1993)*: It aimed at accommodating the credit needs of the poor and asset-less women in the informal sector.
- *Mahila E-Haat (7th March, 2016)*: Helping women to make financial and economic choices which will enable them to be a part of 'Make in India' and 'Stand Up India' initiatives.
- *Women Empowerment and Livelihood Programme in Mid-Gangetic Plains- 'Priyadarshini' (Pilot Project)* : focusing on Women empowerment and Livelihood in Mid-Gangetic Plains. It also empower to address their political, legal, health problems.
- *Nari Shakti Puraskar (1999)*: recognizing women who have exceeded expectations to challenge the status quo and make a lasting contribution to women's empowerment.
- *Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women (STEP) (1986-87 –revised, December, 2014)*: providing skills that give employability to women, to provide competencies and skill that enable women to become self-employed/ entrepreneurs.
- *SWADHAR Scheme (A Scheme for Women in Difficult Circumstances) (2002)*: providing holistic and integrated services to women in difficult circumstances and without any family, social and economic support, such as destitute widows deserted by their family in religious places like Vrindhaban and Kashi, women prisoners released from jails; women survivors of natural disasters who have been rendered homeless, trafficked women/girls rescued or runaway from brothels, women victims of terrorist violence without any means for survival, mentally challenged women and women with HIV/AIDS deserted by their family, etc.
- *Rajiv Gandhi National Creche Scheme for the Children of Working Mothers (2006)*: provide day-care facilities for children (6 months to 6 years) of working mothers in the community; improving nutrition and

health status of children; promoting physical, cognitive, social and emotional development of children; and educating and empowering parents /caregivers for better childcare.

- **Working Women Hostel** (1972, re-lunched on 6th April, 2017): promote availability of safe and conveniently located accommodation for working women, with day care facility for their children, wherever possible, in urban, semi urban, or even rural areas where employment opportunities for women exist.
- **UJJAWALA : A Comprehensive Scheme for Prevention of trafficking and Rescue, Rehabilitation and Re-integration of Victims of Trafficking and Commercial Sexual Exploitation** (December 2007): For the prevention of trafficking and providing support for rescue, rehabilitation, reintegration and repatriation of women and child victims of trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation in India. The Scheme is being implemented mainly through NGOs to provide direct aid and benefit to the victims of trafficking.
- **Women Helpline Scheme** (1st April, 2015): To provide 24 hour emergency and non-emergency response to women affected by violence including sexual offences and harassment both in public and private sphere, including e family, community, workplace, etc.
- **One Stop Centre Scheme** (1st April, 2015): 1) It is a Centrally Sponsored Scheme. Its aim is to set up One Stop Centres (OSC) which is to be funded from the Nirbhaya Fund. 2) To provide support and assistance to women affected by violence at private or at any public place, irrespective of caste, class, religion, region, sexual orientation or marital status.
- **Beti Bachao Beti Padhao Scheme** (22 January, 2015): the objective of the scheme was to provide education to girls' and their welfare; prevent the violation in the interest of girls; and celebrate the birth of a girl child.

For supporting girls and women, the Government of India has developed its policies, in different sectors, to meet the current movements toward women's rights. Ministry of Women and Child Development, for instance, has also amended and improved its policy in favor of women. According to this ministry, the objectives of its policy are:

1. Creating an environment through positive economic and social policies for full development of women to enable them to realize their full potential
2. The de-jure and de-facto enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedom by women on equal basis with men in all spheres – political, economic, social, cultural and civil
3. Equal access to participation and decision making of women in social, political and economic life of the nation
4. Equal access to women to health care, quality education at all levels, career and vocational guidance, employment, equal remuneration, occupational health and safety, social security and public office etc.
5. Strengthening legal systems aimed at elimination of all forms of discrimination against women
6. Changing societal attitudes and community practices by active participation and involvement of both men and women.
7. Mainstreaming a gender perspective in the development process.
8. Elimination of discrimination and all forms of violence against women and the girl child.
9. Building and strengthening partnerships with civil society, particularly women's organizations.

*Ministry of Women and Child Development (2022)*

In modern India, the calls for equality and women's rights have increased. Activists like Sunitha Krishnan (a Padma Shri awardee) work relentlessly for rescuing and protecting girls and women who are trafficked or raped. Bhadran (2022) stated that 'social entrepreneurs like Arunachalam Muruganantham, who invented the low-cost sanitary-pad-making machine so that even women from rural India could afford to buy them, travels around the country have also contributed to the empowerment of women in Modern India. He also indicated that "The United Nations Development Program (UNDP India) also runs projects to provide vocational training and skill building to young women to enable them for their future (p.5).

## Women's Economic Empowerment

Around the world, there has been some kind of gender gaps between men and women at all levels including educational attainment, health, and societal economic engagement. As to economic empowerment, women have been treated inferior to men due to the negative realization of women's capability to contribute fully to the economy, and due to the social and structural boundaries that might not facilitate their access to the available economic opportunities. In recent decades, there has been worldwide evolution in narrowing the gender gaps as many movements seek gender equality at all levels. It is believed that investment in women has a multiplier effect on productivity, efficiency, and sustained economic growth. Accordingly, the developed communities have recently promoted their potential toward women's economic empowerment, asserting the women's significant roles they play in modern societies' inclusive and sustainable progression and development.

Although Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) has attracted attention (Hunt & Samman, 2016) and become central to recognizing women's rights and gender equality (Un Women, 2018), no universal definition has already given to this ideology. The economic empowerment of women includes several related processes including the enhancement of women's equal access to and control over economic resources (Taylor & Pereznieta, 2014), women's equal access to paid work (OECD, 2019), women's equal participation in the markets, expressive involvement in economic decision-making at the level of international institution and not restricted to the household management.

In a workshop on Women's Economic Empowerment and Gender Responsive Policies, hold on 22 August, 2022, in Dhaka, experts stressed reviewing the current notions to safeguard women's economic empowerment. For instance, Anne Van Leeuwen, the Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Bangladesh stated, "Women's economic empowerment is imperative to strengthen women's voice and improve their position socially, economically and within the family". He concluded that supporting women's economic empowerment advances their personal needs, interests, and goals in addition to firming up the national economy. The workshop concluded that women's economic advancement has led to increased investments in children's education and health, and reduced household poverty.

## Women and Girls: The Worldwide Reality Today

Although women's empowerment is getting the attention of governments around the world, there is still much effort needed to implement the governments' agendas and policies to translate gender equality into reality. In an interactive displayed presentation screen, the UN Women shows the real facts and numbers for the women and girls worldwide today as follows:

- more than 800 women still die every day from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth – 99 per cent of them in developing countries.
- only 70 girls are enrolled for every 100 boys in tertiary level education in sub-Saharan Africa.
- Poverty is one of the greatest challenges of our time, disproportionately affecting women and girls; their health, employment and safety.
- Women's representation is still lagging in politics. In 2015, only 22 per cent of all national parliamentarians were female, a slow increase from 11.3 per cent in 1995. People still live in extreme poverty.
- Women are severely underrepresented in the news today. Only around 1 in 4 people heard or read about in news are women. In addition, women only hold 27 per cent of top management jobs in media organizations.
- Gender equality before the law still does not always translate into reality. Although more than 140 countries guarantee gender equality in their constitutions, women face inequalities directly and indirectly through laws, policies, stereotypes and social practices.
- Women today comprise only around 30 per cent of researchers in natural sciences, engineering and technology, medical and health sciences, agricultural sciences, social sciences and humanities.
- Women are integral to lasting peace. Studies show there is a 35 per cent greater chance of peace agreements lasting 15 years when women participate. Yet women are still largely absent from the peace table.
- Even with her efforts, the gender wage gap still exists for women in all lifestyles. Globally, women earn 24 per cent less than men do.

- When it comes to nationality, progress still needs to be made. In more than 60 countries, women are denied the right to acquire, change or retain their nationality, including conferring nationality to non-national spouses.
- Sustainable development is a key driver to women's economic empowerment. Yet, today, less than 20 per cent of landholders are women. Gender differences in access to land and credit can limit economic opportunities for women farmers.
- Worldwide, more than 700 million women alive today were married before age 18. Out of them, 250 million were married before 15.

## Conclusion

Women's Empowerment is the process through which women and girls can express themselves and show their capabilities to do whatever is possible for them in situations where they have been constrained. Human Rights Organizations around the world are stressing creating proper environments where women and girls can express themselves. Differentiation between women and men is seen as a disease that may render society sustainable development. Women and girls, in India, have been treated inferior to men and boys for centuries. Yet, the government of India has the voice to fight in favor of women's rights and gender equality going in pace with other developmental and modern societies. The government of India has initiated many programs and schemes during the last few decades to uplift the status of women, yet there should be more effort to execute its full versions of policies and agendas. The Government of India recognizes that women's empowerment leads to increased investments in children's education and health, and reduced household poverty. As a result, it always attempts to improve its policies to suit the global changes and modern thoughts on women's rights.

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