



WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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Women empowerment is a moral compulsion:

Women constitute half of the human resources. Traditionally, she was playing a vital role in the family as well as in the farm. With the emergence of the new challenges of the modern world, she was not reluctant to undertake the changing roles. Still she was treated as the silent producer. However, there is a recent recognition of women in all progressive societies and groups. With the world –wide acceptance of the participative philosophy in development, planners and policy-makers were giving equal thrust to women empowerment in the development process. Whether the philosophy was accepted as a democratic right or as an administrative strategy was a matter of conjecture. But women empowerment was accepted as an essential input for development by governmental organizations (GOS) and non-governmental organizations (NGOS). Involvement of women turned to be a moral compulsion also. Thus, by accepting empowerment as a sound philosophy and useful strategy, development practitioners were keen to increase the involvement of women in development programmes and projects. It was an acceptance of the role of women in the production process and was an attempt to improve the plight of the neglected women folk.

Empowerment will arrest the age-old subordination of women:

Yes! Empowerment will arrest the total subordination of women in the society and will take them to the mainstream of the development process. It will not only increase their income and quality of life, but will also ensure them the values of democracy and equality in the society. It is very apt to quote Gandhiji here that women are the companion of men, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in very minutest detail in the activities of man and she has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him. She is entitled to a supreme place in her own sphere of activity as man is in his. This ought to be the natural condition of things and not as result only of learning to read and write. By sheer force of a vicious custom, even the most ignorant and worthless men have been enjoying a superiority over women which they do not deserve and ought not to have. Many of our movements stop half way because of the condition of our women.¹As Gandhi expressed, women has to be resumed in her supreme place like man. This is the natural condition of human life. Nature has given this

natural condition but man-made meaningless restrictions and made her to lag behind. Now the movement of empowerment is 'on' exercising its fullest practical philosophy to reach to its eventual scheme of nature in no time.

Thus women's empowerment is directly related to nature's development as well as rational development. The development of women's resources, abilities, interests, skills and other potentialities are of paramount importance in human / nature's development. To undergo such complete 'natural condition' as advised by Gandhiji, we need to have a thought providing philosophy of empowerment of women, to sensitize and motivate to the eventual goal of nature as "men and women are equally supreme persons in their own spheres and roles."

Gandhi cheered up women by saying that: "I therefore, want the women of India not to believe themselves weak and give up their right and privilege of protecting their progeny. It is sheer ignorance to call women weak, women who has been the mother of mighty heroes like Hanuman." ²

Today's Position of Women:

Notwithstanding the remarkable changes in the position of women in free India, there is still a great divergence between the constitutional position and stark reality of deprivation and degradation. Whatever whiff of emancipation has blown in Indian society, has been inhaled and enjoyed by women belonging to the rural areas are still totally untouched by the winds of change. There still exists a wide gulf between the goals enunciated in the constitution, legislations, policies, plans programmes and related mechanisms on the one hand and the situational reality of the status of women in India on the other.

Although, gender discrimination has been banned by the constitution and women have been guaranteed political equality with men, yet there is a difference between the constitutional rights and the rights enjoyed in reality by women. Even after 61 years of independence, barring a few exceptions, women have remained outside the domain of power and political authority. Although they constitute about half of the citizens, over the years their participation by way of voting has increased, yet their participation and representation in law making and law implementing bodies is not very satisfactory. No doubt, the 73rd and 74th constitution Amendment Acts have provided access to women in the decision making process at the grass-root level but their representation in the parliament and state legislatures is woefully poor.

If Gender Justice is to be ensured, women need to be empowered socially, economically, politically and legally. If women are to be empowered socially, it is necessary to make every one of them to literate, and generate awareness, equip them with legal literacy and help them in every way to realize their own potential. Empowerment education is a strategy used with subordinated populations in numerous settings, including poor, marginalized women in the Third World. Various approaches within this type of strategy reflect the elements in society that are deemed significant by the program providers. Psychologically informed educational efforts seek to enhance self-concept and self-esteem; these qualities are thought to empower women so that they are better able to be in charge of, and control, their own lives. Many educational and training programs seek cognitive empowerment i.e., the acquisition of skills and knowledge that will make possible more options for the women.

If women are to be empowered economically it is necessary to equip them with vocational skills; provide employment and income generation, extend free channels of micro-credit, provide management skills, social security and thus allow them greater visibility. If immediate need is to adapt to different forms of affirmative action so that women in proportionate numbers reach critical places to ensure that their voices are heard.

Those with strong Marxist class orientations seek economic empowerment and assume that, for women, such empowerment will promote equality in other areas as well; class differences are the basis of inequality in such a view.

When gender is central, and when all four components of empowerment are included, we see potential for the improvement of women's lives and for the dismantling of social barriers that promote and maintain gender inequality. Training and education for change and empowerment of women in the Third World result in individual empowerment and social transformation whereby women have more control over their lives and more of an effect in changing society to eliminate or reduce gender bias and discrimination. In fact, it is the empowerment strategy that has emerged as the most challenging task not only for those who are workingwomen, but also for women themselves.

Professor Amartya Sen, believed that education must be basic right for all citizens. The major social indicators such as education, health care, infant mortality are the indicators of the development of women. He also emphasized that centralized intervention is needed in the empowerment of women. Vocational and technical training is a significant key factor for self-reliance and promotion of self-esteem among the women and girls. Guidance and counseling facilities at school and colleges, awareness campaigns in rural area regarding utility of vocational and technical courses will influence to promote women empowerment. Improving women have a direct link to growth and human development. If women can exercise their choices in political, social and economic spheres, there is good prospect that growth will be strong, democratic participating and durable. The gender empowerment measure concentrates on participation-economic, political and professional, which is also concerned with basic capability and living standards. Women should be at the center of all development processes.

Future strategies for empowerment of women:

- **How can philosophy be a help for women empowerment?** One of the best means is that there need to be an insight and re-reading of the Indian philosophy Jainism, Buddhism, Christianity and other religions, which have given a rightful place to women in the home and in society. Hinduism has always recognized the two sexes as complementing with each other. Through myth and mythology, sign and symbol, rite and ritual it has communicated this message down the centuries. Siva gave half his body to Parvati and there is thus a fusion of the two. Lakshmi resides in the heart of Vishnu, while Brahma gave his speech to Saraswati and Krishna his mind to Satyabhama. These lessons of Hinduism have to be re-learned by modern Hindus, especially modern Hindu men.
- **The mind set need to be changed:**The social status accorded to Hindu women is conditional by religion, politics, economics, legal, educational and other

social determinants that contribute a great deal to their stature in society. In this context, a legal statute, a political right, or a civil liberty is but paltry crumbs thrown to women. Only a genuine change in the minds of men, a warrant in their heart, openness in their attitudes and a depth in their values can bring about critical and relevant changes to the status of modern Hindu women and that would lead women to be empowered to the highest level of 'control' as is measured by UNESCO.

- **Indian society needs the work ethics:** In the past, when there were no printing presses and few facilities for public speeches, when we could cover 24 miles in as many hours instead of a thousand as now, there was only one effective means of propagating ideas, namely, one's work. Today, we rush from place to place with the speed of air, deliver speeches and write articles, and yet we find it almost impossible to persuade people to act as we want them to. From every direction we hear words of despair. To me it is clear that, as in the past, so in the present to we shall not succeed in impressing the people with speeches and writings as effectively as we can with work."³
- **Budget need to be enhanced** gradually for these developmental programmes. These finances should not be viewed as welfare subsidies but as investments.
- **The administration needs to be completely removed** and the programmes should be handed over to local women-groups for implementation.
- **Strengthening of local level women Groups:** Local women groups need to be strengthened and empowered through Non-Governmental Organizations.
- **Protection of women's employment need to be taken care** as the changing economic scenario has negative and positive prospects for women. Negative prospects are to be controlled and positive prospects are to be encouraged.
- **Women producers are to be strengthened** by organizing them, by linking them up to development opportunities such as exports and by offering them protection till they are strong enough to stand on their own.

Rural Development through women empowerment:

The term Rural Development is a subset of the broader term 'Development'. However we define that, development is a universally cherished goal of individuals, families, communities and nations all over the world. Development is also natural in the sense that all forms of life on earth have an inherent urge to survive and develop. Given these two attributes-its universal supremacy as a goal and its natural occurrence, development deserves a philosophical and scientific study and analysis.

To understand 'Rural Development', it is a strategy to enable a specific group of people, poor rural women and men, to gain for themselves and their children more of what they want and need. It involves helping the poorest among those who seek a livelihood in the rural areas to demand and control more of the benefits of rural development. The group includes small scale farmers, tenants and the landless.

"The process of rural development may be compared with a train in which each coach pushes the one ahead of it, and is in turn pushed by the one behind, but it takes a powerful engine to make the whole train more powerful.⁴ Such Powerful engine is as we identified-the empowered rural women. 'Empowering rural women' is one of the prime strategies for rural development.

Need of Rural Development:

“Rural Development is an integral part of the overall development. A policy of rural development is a policy of national development. Rural development has been an important component of India’s efforts towards betterment of living standards of the people and to this end the country has implemented a large number of rural development programmes. If commitment dating from the earliest days of planning to Rural development under the constitution is the direct responsibility of the state it under takes formulation and implementation of the programmes of rural reconstruction”.⁵

Why rural development depends on women empowerment:

Women are vital and productive workers in India’s national economy. They make up one-third of the labor force. The female participation rate rises to 51 percent when women who work part time or whose main activity is collecting fuel and fodder or working in dairy, paltry or kitchen garden production for the family, is added to those who are conventionally defined to be in the labor force. Labor force participation is higher for SC/ST women than for the rest of their counter parts. Housework is important for women in all-economic groups whether they are employed outside or not, the responsibility for domestic maintenance cooking, cleaning, washing, childcare, etc.

Measures to strengthen women’s Empowerment and Rural Development:

Empowerment of women is the prime objective of all development programmes and policies.⁶ These programmes could be planned properly and implemented effectively in order to attain self-sufficiency and self-reliance. U.N commission on status of women says: “women constitute half of the world’s population, accomplish about two thirds of its work hours, receive one tenth of the world’s income.”⁷ The following measures can strengthen self-employment in rural area in the service sector, which will generate additional income leading to economic independence of women:

- Identification and organization of innovative and high income generating activities suitable for women.
- Development of entrepreneurial abilities of women by organizing special types of training.
- Encouraging women to take up part-time jobs while being in the house itself, to earn additional income to support the family.
- Effective planning at the micro-level.
- Adequate representation of women experts in the case of women related development planning.
- Central and state governments to place more emphasis on neglected areas in the service sector to involve women.
- Government can establish a separate mechanism at the center, state and district levels to look after women’s employments and their problems.
- Development of infrastructure facilities and supportive services like land, building, transport and also to look after the children.
- Encouraging women through formal and non-formal education to involve themselves in the service sector.

- Organizing women laborer in the service through women's associations, cooperative societies or MahilaMandals, Self-help groups etc.
- Establishment of supervisory bodies to monitor the implementation of constitutional provisions related to women. Steps to make women aware of technical and financial assistance available to women entrepreneurs and to encourage them through concessions and incentives to enter into the service sector related to women.
- Government should encourage research and development in the service sector to find out high-income generating activities suitable for women.
- Wide publicity to training programmes in the service sector.
- Creating awareness among educated and uneducated women about the availability of facilities and concessions of entrepreneurs.

Factors impacting women's empowerment:

Violence: women are the predominant victims of conflict, sexual violence, injury, death, intimidation and human trafficking

Lack of adequate access to education, training and technology

Lack of access to clean water, sanitation

Lack of access to responsible health care/reproductive health (one of the costs of widely available pre-natal screening in India has been the selective abortion of female fetuses, 10 million in the past two decades - this has led to one of the most skewed gender ratios in the world with 927 girls to every 1000 boys in 2001).

Lack of access to credit/finance, safe work conditions, living/minimum wages

Cultural practices, tradition, religious interpretations of women's status

Women's lack of knowledge about rights and laws (economic, social, political, religious).

- Lack of adequate representation in decision-making positions and governance structures
- A lack of attention and resources devoted to the issue of women's economic empowerment, combined with a lack of coherence between macro-economic policies and development policies and programmes, mean that true economic empowerment for women remains elusive. It is an issue however that demands attention in an increasingly globalizing and interdependent economy.
- A recent study by the World Economic Forum highlighted that no country has yet managed to eliminate the gap between women and men's economic participation. Even those countries that achieved high scores in the World Economic Forum empowerment index generally performed better in women's educational attainment, health and well-being and political

empowerment rather than in women's economic participation and opportunities.

Conclusion

- Empowerment is a way of definition, challenging and overcoming barriers of one's life through which people increase their ability to shape their own lives and environment. Empowerment is a multidimensional process, which enables individuals to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life. It consists of greater access to knowledge and resources greater autonomy in decision making to enable them to have greater ability to plan their lives and free from shocks imposed on them by custom, belief and practice.
- Empowerment has to be interims of information, knowledge, skills, awareness, and it has to be against powerful forces of domination and exploitation. The overall objectives of a sustainable development process has to be built into the design of the poverty alleviation programmes.
- The concept of empowerment as a goal of development projects and programmes has been gaining a process of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation, to greater decision-making power and control and transformation action. The empowerment of women covers both an individual and collective transformation. It strengthens their innate ability through acquiring knowledge, power and experience. Empowerment of women is a challenge to society because it breaks the long established pattern of family life. Women need support, counseling and training in order to become empowered. Her desires and her goal finally enable her to break the barriers to reach her goal.

A development strategy without involving gender, as an important category appears wasteful and self-defeating. Hence the development of women thereby the development of Nation is impossible without the empowerment of women.

The present United Progressive Alliance Government (UPA) in its National Common Minimum Programme (NCMP) has laid down sex based principles of governance, one of which is to empower women politically, educationally, economically and legally. Following are the commitments made under the NCMP for women:

Introduce legislation for one –third reservations for women in VidhanSabhas and in Lok Sabha.

Legislation on domestic violence and against gender discrimination will be enacted.

At least one-third of all funds flowing into Panchayats will be earmarked for programmes for the development of women and children.

Village women and their associations will be encouraged to assume responsibility for all development schemes relating to drinking water, sanitation, primary education, health and nutrition.

Complete legal equality for women in all spheres will be made a practical reality, especially by removing discriminatory legislation and by enacting new legislation that gives women, for instance, equal rights of ownership of assets like houses and land.

In eleventh plan (2007-12), the strategy for women is only confined to three areas- violence against women, economic empowerment and women's health. There has been no attempt to understand that empowerment of women has to be visualized as a holistic integrated approach and not in a piece meal manner or as water tight compartments. More often than not, the lines dividing social, economic or political areas are highly diffused and blurred with crises crossing intersections. Over the years there have been efforts made to socially, economically and politically empower women but as a result of the lack of synergy or coordination between these activities, the outcomes could never be completely satisfactory. For example, the increasing number of women representations into the PEIs should have meant automatic improvement in the lives of rural women, but if it has not happened, it is because the elected women were not educated or literate or even made aware of their rights.

It is imperative that an integrated policy and strategy be formulated that addresses economic, social, and political empowerment simultaneously and holistically along with the requisite programmes and schemes. Once such a comprehensive policy and programs flowing from it are put in place, it will be possible to enable an all round development of women, which will usher in true empowerment. This is the philosophy of empowerment, which will be the bedrock on which the Eleventh Plan approach to women will be based. Keeping in view the philosophy of empowerment it is essential that the Eleventh plan should indicate clearly the direction that the planning process intends to take for women in the ensuing five years and delineate the thrust areas.

An underlying thread (*Sutratman*) that will form the essence of empowerment philosophy is gender equality and elimination of gender discrimination essential ingredients that must be inherent in the thrust areas and also incorporated as an integral part not only in all programs and schemes for women, but also in the delivery mechanism and outreach services to the beneficiary. Gender equality is a constituent of development as well as an instrument of development. No country can be deemed developed if half of its population is severely disadvantaged in terms of basic needs, livelihood options, access to knowledge, and political voice. It is an instrument of development because without gender equality other goals of development will also be difficult to achieve, namely the goals of poverty alleviation, economic growth, environmental sustainability, etc. A natural corollary of ensuring gender equality is the elimination of gender discrimination. Inequalities between girls and boys in access to schooling or adequate health care prove a very serious disadvantage to women and girls and limit their capacity to participate in the benefits of development.

The Indian Government has focused its attention on women empowerment since the Seventh Five-year Plan (1985-90). Since twenty years of its attention on women empowerment majority of women lagging behind to get empowered. A very little section of Indian women are empowered.

To conclude with all confidence that, women can make a new world, much happier to live, provided we help them and empower them socially, economically, politically and legally. Women's rights and issues have always been a subject of serious concern. However, women in rural India, by and large remain bogged down with domestic work, rearing cattle and other supportive and productive work. They are by and large not part of the decision making process and have little control over money matters and assets even though they continue substantially to contribute in asset formation, especially in rural India. This state of affairs is universal. Though they work hard on par with men, their contribution in global earnings is marginal.

It may be true that "women are born with intelligence, some men achieve it, most men have it thrust upon them."⁸ Why Dureant proposed "women are born with intelligence" probably his answer follows that, "Women wins her victories not through fighting nor through bravery but through persistence and tenacity"⁹ and hence he might have perceived that In ten stages of march towards the civilization beginning with 'Speech' as its first stage, Durant viewed that, "For civilization came through two things chiefly: **the home**, which developed those social dispositions that form the psychological cement of society; and **agriculture**, which took man from his wandering life as hunter, harder and killer and settled him long enough in one place to let him build homes, schools, churches, colleges, universities, civilization. But it was woman who gave man agriculture and the home. She domesticated man as she domesticated the sheep and animal, and perhaps he is the last creature that will be civilized by woman."¹⁰

For these reasons Gandhi wished every woman to participate life long in public life, to help the poor and needy and to empower them to bring cheers in their lives. Listen to what Gandhi is saying: "After your education is finished you will not disappear from public life; you will not disappear in the household simply doing the household work but you will extend your helping hand to the poor and needy, who need all the help that can be given to them. I hope this will serve as an inestimable instrument in your hands to bring cheer into those unhappy homes where extreme desolation prevails. Historians of India will tell us that about one-tenth of the population lives in semi-starvation."¹¹

Gandhi believed in all spheres of empowerment including the spiritual empowerment of women which can change the face of the country. Listen, what he said: To call them (women) abala is to condemn the inherent strength of women; in my view it is an insult to them. If we peruse the history.... We shall come across marvelous instances of bravery shown by women. They not only exhibited their bravery through arms, but by building up their moral courage they developed immense strength. If women resolve to bring glory to the nation within a few months they can totally change the face of the country because of the spiritual background of women.¹²

As women begin to realize their strength, as they must in proportion to the education they receive, they will naturally resent the glaring inequalities to which they are subjected

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