

Women Empowerment in India: A Contemporary Perspective

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Abstract: Delivering multiple roles effortlessly every single day, women are undoubtedly the backbone of any society. Doting daughters, caring mothers, competent colleagues wide range of many other roles are played by women around us flawlessly with grace. However, they have been ignored fraction of the society in many parts of the world. This in turn has caused women at large to bear the burnt of inequality, oppression, financial dependability and other social evils. For centuries now, women have been living under bondage that restricts them from achieving professional as well as personal heights. Hence, the present study concentrates on women empowerment and related review of literature. The main objective of the study is to find the gap in women empowerment studies. A thorough literature study lead to the identification of some valid considerations (education, skill training, digital knowledge, access to resources) that help women to empower themselves.

Key words: Empowerment, women empowerment, SHG, integrated capacity building, inequality, literature study, empowerment

INTRODUCTION

The subject of empowerment of women has become a burning issue all over the world including India, since, last few decades and is considered as one of the important factors among all other factors which contribute for sustainable economic development of a country. Women empowerment is a much raised topic which is discussed globally. But why is it necessary? Why we are trying to fill this gender gap? Why women are not given equality and trust in the society? Even in 21st century, still women have to run for their rights! There would be no need of whole campaign for women empowerment, if we ourselves could try to get the balance. A home maker can become a corporate leader at any point of time and in our country itself we have many women as such. Then why do we yet need this women empowerment concept? Is this gender gap filled in all states? Do the women in our country get their deserved rights? By staying in urban areas we have completely forgotten this topic! But the reality says that, this topic needs much more attention than it is getting and it is not only to be known topic but it should be enlightened by bringing it in to practice. If we aim to empower a women of rural areas it will be an indirect force to empower a family. Women forms a chain of knowledge that she has and it will be passed on to someone and as the one who can bring society to betterment. Ever wondered? What will happen, if we decide to educate and train to acquire special skill to all the women in the country? Well we think the country will finally be tagged as developed country instead of developing country.

Empowerment means creating an environment in which a person can choose their choices independently (or) collectively and can make their own decisions for social transformation to endure in the social environment and it also strengthens the innate ability for acquiring knowledge, power and experience. Hashemi *et al.* (1996) Women empowerment refers to increasing and improving the social, economic, political and legal strength of the women to ensure equal-rights to women and to make them confident enough to claim their rights. The entire process may be broken down in to three dimensions, viz., economic, social and political which reinforce each other. While the economic aspects would include increasing women's access to land and command over tangible and intangible resources (such as wealth, property, employment, knowledge and information) social aspect would include changing the existing discriminatory ideology and culture which determine the environment for women's existence. Finally, political process must increase women's presence and influence in the power structure (Acharya and Ghimire, 2005).

The United National Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) explains the term women's empowerment as acquiring knowledge and understanding of gender relations and the ways in which the relations may be changed. Developing a sense of self-worth, a belief in one's ability to secure desired changes and the right to control one's life. Gaining the ability to generate choices exercise bargaining power. Developing the ability to organize and influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order nationally and internationally (Anonymous, 2000).

Possessing knowledge is empowering while the lack of knowledge is debilitating. The World Bank organized a forum called “Voices of Poor” which got feedback from 60,000 people in 60 countries which concluded that people wanted access to knowledge and opportunities instead of charity to fight conditions leading to poverty. World Bank (2000) knowledge is not as resource it is infinitely expansible and proliferates with its use, ... , “the capacity to acquire and generate knowledge in all its forms including the recovery and upgrading of traditional knowledge is perhaps the most important factor in the improvement of human condition” (Sagasti and Bezanson, 1995).

To begin with empowerment: Rappaport (1984), viewed empowerment as a process; the mechanism by which people, organizations and communities gain mastery over their lives.

Women empowerment: Refers to the creation of an environment for women where they can make decisions of their own for their personal benefits as well as for the society. Often there is no clear demarcation between operational meanings of these terms of women’s empowerment. The concepts are still not clearly defined, different scholars hold different definitions of empowerment according to the focus of their work some of the studies are as follows Table 1.

Table 1: Empowerment of the studies

Studies	Definition of empowerment	Indicators	Overlapping zone
Sen	Empowerment is an expansion in individual’s agency, i.e., expansion in one’s ability to act and bring about change whose achievement can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives	Access to basic facilities Access to training and higher education Employment	Access to resources and material wellbeing
Kishor	Empowerment has come to denote women’s increased control over their own lives, bodies and environments. In discussions of women’s empowerment, emphasis is often placed on women’s decision making roles, their economic self-reliance and their legal rights to equal treatment, inheritance and protection against all forms of discrimination in addition to the elimination of barriers to access such resources as education and information	Household work and decision making Financial autonomy, participation in the modern sector, lifetime exposure to employment and sharing of roles and decision making	Access to resources
Ibrahim and Alkire	Empowerment is an increase in certain kind of agency that are deemed particularly instrumental to the situation at hand	Empowerment as control, i.e., control over personal decision making, empowerment in community, i.e., changing aspect in one’s life at individual level and empowerment as change, i.e., changing aspect in one’s life at community level	Autonomy and agency
Kabeer	Empowerment refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability, that means people who exercise a great deal of choice in their lives may be very powerful but they are not empowered at first place	Empowerment as a process: access to basic facilities access to training and higher education Ability of decision making	Resources, agency and achievements
Malhotra <i>et al.</i>	Empowerment is a dynamic process. Separating the process in to components (such as enabling factors, agency and outcomes)	Labour market participation, wage differential, occupational division, Female literacy and enrolment in secondary school. Marriage and kinship system, women’s physical mobility. Political participation, legal rights	Access to resources and agency
Charmes and Wieringa	Women’s empowerment can be seen as a process in which the following elements will be considered: awareness/ consciousness, choice/alternatives, resources, voice, agency and participation. This dimension of women’s empowerment is linked to enhancing women’s ability to make choices over the areas in their lives that matter to them, both the strategic life choices that Kabeer (1999) discusses and to choices related to daily life	The women’s empowerment matrix sketch the contours range from personal to global level distinguishing between physical, socio-cultural, religious, political, legal and economic	Access to resources
Roy and Niranjana	Empowerment is associated with indirect indicators like education and work participation of women and direct indicators of female autonomy (empowerment) such as decision making, mobility and access to economic resources that can be viewed both as an outcome and a process	Indirect indicators of empowerment: education, occupation, women’s access to and control over resources. Direct indicators of empowerment: involvement in decision making, freedom of movement and access to money	Access to resources
Oakley	Empowerment is an increase in power. Power can be either: variable sum refers to process through which the powerless can be empowered without any change in levels of power and zero sums refers to any gain in power by one group results in reduction of the power exercised by others	Work division in the household; attitude towards girls, access to household property; control over resources; participation; organization and collective action; self-confidence; social status; work pattern and productivity	Access to resources and Wellbeing

Literature review: Getting ladies to the market economy emphatically influences their impact in asset assignment and household basic leadership by large (Acharya and Bennett, 1983), women's work advertise position has enhanced, in spite of the fact that there are still critical individual expenses to ladies defensive laws, maternity insurance laws and laws on kid care may raise the cost of enlisting women square with pay arrangements are frequently in viable and separation clarifies a significant part of the gender orientation wage crevice. Women pick up learning and empowering through market get to, however, it seldom happens (Ackerley, 1995) utilizing existing types of social money to channel microcredit limit advantages to women, particularly the poorest appear to have the capacity to profit socially as well as monetarily (Mayoux, 2001) and it is recommended to present a program that not only fosters group formation but also supports more mature groups through federation and credit access with a specific end goal to have noteworthy monetary advantages in the long term but the greater part of the women keeps on being restricted to miniaturized scale, despite endeavours made toward economic empowerment of women but social setting has backhanded and coordinate consequences for women monetary power status impacts budgetary plans and basic leadership control. Working women perceived more issues and non working women confronted issues because of weakness, control proportion was better for the working women and non working women utilized distinctive techniques to get control the preconditions of empowerment by incorporating financial, human and social assets by involving pooling of resources to achieve collective strength and entailing the improvement of technical skill, managerial and analytical abilities of local women should also be provided with institutional support, like training, marketing and information on available latest technology and further training, relating to the activity chosen should be imparted (Malhotra *et al.*, 2002). The practice of power, or agency, within the sight of assets is the procedure of strengthening the bury connections of the empowerment and development are presumably too realize uniformity amongst men and women.

Empowerment of women became even more significant as women have a strategic role in incubation and transfer of critical knowledge which often forms the blue print of survival for communities to adapt and minimize their risk in adverse circumstances. Women, because of their biological and social roles are generally more rooted than men in the confines of their locality. They are therefore, more aware than men of the social,

economic and environmental needs of their own communities. Women empowerment is a prerequisite for creating a good nation. If women empower her competencies towards decision making will promote women empowerment among the rural women. Empowerment of women particularly rural women has become an important issue in the strategies of balanced development with social justice. Economic empowerment results in women's ability to influence or make right decision, increase self confidence better status and role in household etc. It is believed that economic strength is the basis of social, political and psychological power in the society, thus, the lower strata of women mostly stems from their low economic status and subsequent dependence and lack of decision making power, therefore, if women gains economic strength they gain visibility and voice. Facilitating that women's direct participation in decision making capacity and income generation activities can make significant contributions towards women empowerment this will enable women to take the initiative for their development in to their own hands and enhances their status and leads to integration of women in nation building, provides psychological satisfaction and permeate them with a deep sense of self worth to create their own identity in society more and more. The world is becoming integrated the new forces associated with globalization understood as the combination of economic integration, technological diffusion and greater access to information have operated through markets, formal or informal institutions to lift some of the constraints to greater gender equality, in similar lines changing economic structure in the Indian society necessitates women to undertake activities related to their economic environment.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Status of women empowerment in India: The status of women in India has been subject to many great changes over the past few millenia. With a decline in their status from the ancient to medieval times to the promotion of equal rights by many reformers, the history of women in India has been eventful. In modern India, women have held high offices including that of the President, Prime Minister, Speaker of the Lok Sabha, Leader of the opposition, Union Ministers and Governors. In order to empower women in India, SHG's were introduced during the mid-1980's in Karnataka by Mysore Resettlement and Development Agency (MYRADA). It is assumed that increasing women's knowledge and access to information

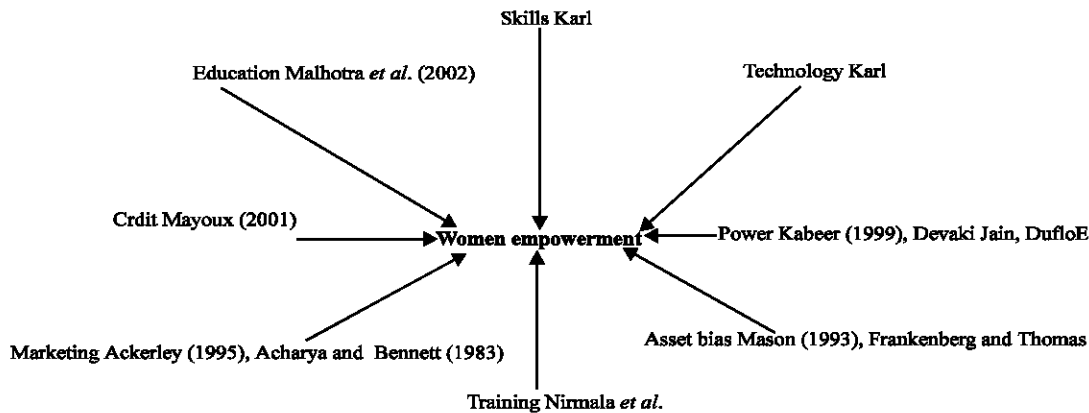


Fig. 1: Holistic approach to women empowerment

services will lead to individual economic empowerment through enabling women to set up micro-enterprises and increasing incomes under their control. This in turn is assumed to enable women to initiate broader social and political changes (Mayoux, 2001).

Empowerment focus on poor women: In India, the trickle-down effect of macroeconomic policies have failed to resolve the problem of gender inequality. Women have been the vulnerable section of society and constitute a sizeable segment of the poverty-struck population. Among the poor, the poor women are most disadvantaged they are characterized by lack of education and access of resources, both of which is required to help them work their way out of poverty and for upward economic and social mobility. The problem is more acute for women in countries like India, despite the fact the women's labour makes a critical contribution to the economy. This is due to the low social status and lack of access to key resources. Evidence shows that groups of women are better customers than men, the better managers of resources. Women's empowerment is considered as an essential component for the development of the society. It is a process of treating the women with same status with that of men in all fields of the society. Women empowerment has become a movement now but in our country it only seems a distant dream we have restricted our perceptions to only upliftment of women from the value of an object to the value of a living being but what is required in the present period is something beyond it. Since, women's empowerment is the key to socio economic development of the community, bringing women into the mainstream of national development has been a major concern of government.

Women are connected to the world through the enabling process of capacity building (Establish learning culture where people have access to knowledge and are

confident to apply it to everyday situation) and focused training, so that, they may acquire the resource skills and sustained life changes necessary to come out of poverty and inspire others to do the same. We conceptualize a Holistic approach to women empowerment (Fig. 1).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Government schemes: Government of India has been launched many schemes for women empowerment. Following are the few of them:

Mother and Child Tracking System (MCTS): It was launched in 2009, helps monitor the health care system to ensure that all mothers and their children have access to a range of services, including pregnancy care, medical care during delivery and immunizations.

Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahyog Yojana Conditional Maternity Benefit Plan (IGMSY-CMB): It is a scheme sponsored by the national government in October, 2010 for pregnant and lactating women age 19 and over for their first two live births.

Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls-sabla (RGSEAG): Scheme launched in 2012 it offers a package of benefits to at-risk between the ages of 10 and 19 which help young women become self-reliant, including nutritional supplementation and education, health and vocational training.

Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK): The National Credit Fund for women launched by the government of India in 1993 to provide access to finance through loans to begin small businesses for lower income women.

Priyadarshini: It was initiated in April, 2011, offers women in seven districts access to self-help groups.

Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB): Implemented on pilot basis, since, 2008 with the objective of meeting the felt needs of the area by mobilizing community action, converging available services and resources of the area, income generation through feasible and sustainable activities for women and to provide services.

Swadhar: Launched by Union Ministry of Women and Child Development in 2002 for rehabilitation of women in difficult times by providing them shelter, food clothing and care to the marginalized women/girls who are in need.

Swayam Siddha: Launched by Ministry of Women and Child Development of government of India with the objective of empowering women by educating them and bringing them in to mainstream.

Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA): Introduced in 1982-83 in a sub-scheme of Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) at district level with the primary objective of focused attention on the women members of rural families below poverty line to provide them the opportunities of self employment on a sustained basis.

Support to Training and Employment Programme (STEP): It is a central Sector Scheme launched in 1986-87 to upgrade skill of poor and assetless women and provide employment on sustainable basis and mobilizing them in viable cooperative groups, strengthening marketing linkages, support services and access to credit.

National Mission for Empowerment of Women (NMEW): It is an initiative of the government of India with a view to empower women socially, economically and educationally. The mission aims to achieve empowerment of women on all these fronts by securing convergence of schemes of different ministries as well as effective implementation of various social laws concerning women.

“There is no tool for development more effective than empowerment of women.” --- Kofi Annan ---

CONCLUSION

Women empowerment is going to be a laborious task in India as it is not going to be easy to change the culture of apathy towards women which is so deep rooted. But it does not mean that it is farfetched, only revolutions bring changes in a day but reforms take their time. In particular this one will take its time. The idea of women empowerment might sound hard by the yard but by inch it is just a cinch, what we need is concentrated efforts

focused in right direction which leads sovereignty of women from all forms of evil. With the growing globalization and liberalization of the economy as well as increased privatization of services, women as a whole have been left behind and not been able to partake the fruits of success. Mainstreaming of women into the new and emerging areas of growth is imperative. The government of India has focused on SHG's in the last few years has to build the capacity of SHG's realizing the fact these are in a more advantageous position to combine their resources and talents for enabling viable income generating activities as compared to alone individual efforts and the time has now come to consider the transformation of those SHG's which have developed considerable capacity and experience to further expand into larger community based organizations. The government of AP has taken up the theme of women empowerment as one of the strategies to tackle socio-economic poverty. This will require training and skill up gradation in emerging trends, if these women SHG's (DWCRA groups in AP) are provided with proper skill training and access to material resources and access to information and knowledge they will become backbone to the economic development of the country. Further studies can be done on capacity building, women empowerment and women empowerment through DWCRA in Andhra Pradesh based on previous empirical studies.

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