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WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: ITS NEED AND THE INDIAN FIVE YEAR PLANS

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ABSTRACT

Empowerment is a complex issue with varying interpretation in different social, national and cultural contexts. Empowerment through education is ideally seen as a continuous holistic process with cognitive, psychological, economic and political dimensions in order to achieve emancipation. Women empowerment is a global issue and discussions on women's political right are at the fore front of many formal and informal campaigns worldwide. The concept of women empowerment was introduced at the international conference at Nairobi in 1985. Education is milestone of women empowerment because it enables them to response to the challenges, to confront their traditional roles and change their lives.

INTRODUCTION

Empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social or economic strength of individual and communities. The term empowerment covers a vast landscape of meaning, interpretations, definitions and disciplines ranging from psychology and philosophy to the highly commercialized self help industry and motivational sciences. Sociological empowerment often addresses member of groups that social discrimination processes have excluded from decision making processes, for example-discrimination based on disability, race, ethnicity, religion or gender. Empowerment as a methodology is often associated with feminism.

The nature of empowerment renders it difficult to define. On the one hand it is often referred to as a global for many development programmes. On the other hand, it can also be conceived as a process that people undergo, which eventually leads to changes. Nelly Stromquist, for instance, defines empowerment as "a process to change the distribution of power both in interpersonal relations and in institutions throughout society" while Lucy Lazo describes it as "a process of acquiring, providing, bestowing the resources and the means and enabling the access to a control over such means and resources". Given the above, the term is therefore more relevant to the marginalized groups, the poor, the illiterate, the indigenous communities and of course, cutting across this categories, the women.

Gandhiji's idea of women's empowerment was "Garvoday" the welfare of all through co-operation and trustee in the economic sphere, equal participation in the political sphere, and mutual aid in the social sphere without regard to caste or class or gender. Kiran Devendra said that "Empowerment of women would mean equipping women to be economically independent, self-reliant, have positive self esteem to enable them to face any difficult situation and they should be able to participate in process of decision making".

In our society women constitute the marginalized section. So empowering women implies enabling them to find ways so that they become able to fight the imbalances in the society and thereby participate equally in the ongoing process of the development. One of the essential tools for capacity building of women is education the access to which even today many women are denied off. Education is the first building block of development upon which everything else such as health care, social care, employment as well as empowerment rest. For education gives people not just qualification to get job but more importantly it creates opportunities and choices for people so that they can be empowered in their lives. Viewed from this perspective the first stepping stone towards empowering women is to educate them. It is only through a good quality education designed on the basis of women and girls immediate and strategic needs that the capacities of women could be built so that they are able to seize opportunities in public as well as in private life. Education is the corner stone of women's empowerment because it enables them to respond to opportunities, to challenge their traditional roles and thereby change their lives.

The empowerment of women is crucial to change some of the social attitudes and behaviours that discriminate against girls and women. Though the society has undergone a rapid transition from the pastoral society to the contemporary global society yet something still remain more or less the same and one such aspect is the position of women which though has improved much more needs to be done.

Again gender disparities in the educational sector is a reality which persists throughout the educational system. Data on enrolment, retention and transition show that in many countries including India girls and women lag behind boys in early child care through primary, secondary, and higher secondary education and in non formal as well as literacy education programmes. As a matter of fact socio-cultural and religious attitudes and beliefs play an important role in keeping girls away from school and women away from attending literacy classes or continuing learning. At the same time house hold poverty too acts as burrier to the education of girls and women. In country like India where the society is predominantly patriarchal, men play the dominant role in the decision making whereas women do not have any will of their own. Their lives get confined within household works and taking care of children as well as the male members of the society. As a result women have lower status in comparison to men. Consequently the access of women, particularly those belonging to the weaker sections with majority living in the rural areas and also in the informal, unorganized sector, to education, health, and productive resources among others are inadequate. Education for women in particular is one of the essential tools not only for ensuring gender equality but also in the process of empowering them so that women can fully contribute to society and many a time it has more significant impact on poverty and development than men's education. So important is the need of education in the process of women empowerment that even the United Nations and its agencies have long been encouraging the world community to discourage gender stereo types and to strengthen the status of women within the family and in the society as a whole. One of the key ways of doing so is by supporting the education of women and specially of girls. In fact,

there has been as evolution in the activities that are being emphasized by the UN and its agencies that supports girls education. The UNESCO World Education Report 1995 has considered the denial of equal education opportunities to girls and women as fundamental challenge to human dignity that limits the scope of human rights. At the same time empowering women through education is also considered as one of the crucial concerns of the Millennium Development Goal on Gender Equality.

NEEDS OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

India is one of the few countries where the women population is lower than that of men. Logically, this should have led to improved status of the women in the country. Unfortunately it is not so. The imbalance in the male-female ratio is due to blind faith as well as the result of illiteracy which have resulted in destruction of the baby girl at the pre-natal stage, deliberate malnutrition and neglect of the girl child in general. The reasons for the need of women empowerment are described below :

1. Economic Condition : Women are generally found to be economically weak in our country. Only a insignificant number of women, that too on the urban areas, are gainfully employed. Majority of them are economically dependent on men and this fact has made them weaker.

2. Illiteracy : In most of the underdeveloped and developing countries women are found to be less literate than men and this has forced them to become dependent and subordinate to men. According to the 2001 census, rate of literacy among men in india is 76% where as it is only 64% among women. The rate of school dropouts is also found to be comparatively higher in case of women. Lack of education is the main cause of their exploitation and negligence. Only literacy can help them to understand the constitutional and legislative provisions that are made to make them strong.

3. Health Problems: Poor health has also added to women's weakness. They usually consume less food which are often not nutritious and work more. This is mostly true in case of rural women. Surveys and studies have revealed that traditional importance towards the male children is a cause of neglecting the health of the female children.

4. Atrocities against women: Women have been subjected to untold exploitation through the ages. There are cases of rape, kidnapping of girls, dowry harassments and sexual harassments, abuse both physical and verbal and so on. Therefore, they need empowerment of all kinds in order to protect themselves and to preserve their dignity.

EDUCATIONAL SCHEMES FOR EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

The government has been introducing various schemes to improve the status of women through education. Some of them are *National Programme for Education, Kausturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV), Mahila Samakhya Programme, Shiksha Sahayog, Swa Shakti*, incentive to

girls for Secondary Education etc. This shows that many schemes are being introduced and government of India is taking special attention to girls' education.

VIEW OF DIFFERENT FIVE YEAR PLAN ON EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

1. First plan (1951-56) : Set up the central social welfare board in 1953 to promote women welfare work through voluntary organization charitable trusts etc.
2. Second plan (1956-61) : Supported the development of *mahila mandals* to work at the grassroots.
3. Third, Forth & Interim plan (1961-74) : Had provisions for women's education, pre-natal and child health services, supplementary feeding for child, nursing expectant.
4. Fifth plan (1974-78) : A major shift in the approach towards women from welfare to development.
5. Sixth Plan (1980-85) : Accepted women's development as a separate Economic agenda. Took a multidisciplinary approach with a three pronged thrust on health, education and employment.
6. Seventh Plan (1985-90) : Had the objective of bringing women into the mainstream of National Development.
7. Eight Plan (1992-97) : Saw a paradigm shift form development to empowerment and benefits to women in the core sector of education health and employment. Outlay for women rose from Rs. 4 crore in the first plan to Rs. 2, 000 crore in the Eight Plan.
8. Ninth Plan (1997-02) : Had empowerment of women as its strategic objective. Accepted the concept of women's component plan to assure that at least 30% of funds / benefits from all development sector flow to women.
9. Tenth plan (2002-07): Suggests specific strategies, policies and programmes for the empowerment of women.
10. Eleventh Plan (2007-11) : Special measures for gender empowerment and equity will be an essential component of the 11th plan. The plan will have a special focus on four aspects - violence against women (VAW), economic empowerment, political participation and women's health.

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