

Women Empowerment: An In-Depth Understanding of the Challenges Faced by Indian Women, Steps Taken by Government and Way Forward

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Abstract: *Empowerment is the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. Empowering women implies giving them means to be financially and intellectually independent in their choices on one hand, and on the other hand, it also means seeding the belief that they are equal to everyone else, have the same rights and can choose what and where to be and to do in their lives. The present paper, which is largely based on secondary sources of data, has tried to make an assessment of various challenges faced by Indian women from cradle to grave. It has also looked into numerous governmental initiatives taken in this direction and finally few substantial suggestions have been put forward by the researcher in the form of an integrated approach so that women in our society can realize their complete potential.*

Keywords: Empowerment, Roles, Challenges, Initiatives, Way forward

1. Introduction: Women Empowerment

Empowering women implies giving them means to be financially and intellectually independent in their choices on one side, and on the other side, it also means seeding the belief that they are equal to everyone else and that they have the same rights and can choose what and where to be and to do in their lives. According to United Nations, Women's empowerment has five components:

- 1) Women's sense of self-worth;
- 2) Their right to have and to determine choices;
- 3) Their right to have access to opportunities and resources;
- 4) Their right to have power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and
- 5) Their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally.

According to the World Bank, empowerment is the process of increasing the capacity of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes. In its essence, women empowerment is a socio-political ideal envisioned in relation to the wider framework of women's rights and a process that leads women to realize their full potential, their rights to have access to opportunities, resources and choices with the freedom of decision making both within and outside home. It would be achieved only when advancement in the conditions of women is accompanied by their ability to influence the direction of social change gained through equal opportunities in economic, social and political spheres of life.

2. Objectives of the Study

In this paper, which is mainly based on secondary sources of data, an attempt has been made to:

- 1) Understand the basics of Women Empowerment from various perspectives/dimensions.
- 2) Make an assessment of various challenges faced by Women in Indian society
- 3) Assess various Governmental Initiatives taken for Empowering Women in India
- 4) Provide some substantial measures for Women Empowerment.

3. Dimensions/ Perspectives of Women Empowerment

The different dimensions of women empowerment include socio-cultural empowerment, economic empowerment, political empowerment and ecological empowerment. Let's have a look into these one by one.

- 1) **Socio-cultural Empowerment:** At individual level, it includes Involvement in decisions about their own health, about large household purchases, about their mobility outside domestic sphere like visits to family and relatives, at marketplace, visiting/staying their friends', about their own earnings, about contraception, menstrual hygiene, sanitation, health, surrogacy and abortion. At familial and societal level, it includes involvement in decisions related to their career and education, children (especially son preference), marriage (e.g., honor killing if one does not abide by family's decision), share in parental/ancestral property, involvement in collective decisions like family planning, management of expenses, decision involving their lifestyle - how they should dress, choice of friends, mannerism/behavior etc. At the governance level, it includes non-recognition of marital

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rape as a crime at the first place; implementation deficit and misuse of social laws like Dowry Prohibition Act-1961, The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act - 2005; No separate definition or classification of Honor Killing as an offence in India (treated as a murder under Section 300 of the IPC punishable under Section 302).

- 2) **Economic Empowerment:** Women's economic empowerment refers to the ability for women to enjoy their right to control and benefit from the resources, assets, income and their own time, as well as the ability to manage risk and improve their economic status and well-being.
- 3) **Political Empowerment:** Political empowerment refers to the process of transferring various elements of power (resources, capabilities, and positions) to those who do not have it. Political empowerment requires inclusion in democratic decision-making processes. Women need to actively participate in government and politics in order to maintain democracy.
- 4) **Ecological Empowerment:** Nature or Earth is ascribed with the status of 'Mother'. The term "Eco-feminism" (first used by Francoise D'Eaubonne in 1980) gained popularity in protests and actions against continued ecological disaster. It is a joining of environmental, feminist, and women's spirituality concerns. As the environmental movement along with environmental crises raised the consciousness of women to the decay of the earth, they began to see a parallel between the devaluation of earth and the devaluation of women. Thus, the concept of Ecofeminism has been introduced to highlight the convergence between nature and women.

a) Role of Women in Society

Throughout history, the central role of women in society has ensured the stability, progress and long-term development of nations and civilizations. Globally, women comprise 43 per cent of the world's agricultural labor force – rising to 70 per cent in some countries. Women are the primary caretakers of children and elders in every country of the world. When the economy and political organization of a society change, women take the lead in helping the family adjust to new realities and challenges. Women's formal and informal labor can transform a community from a relatively autonomous society to a participant in the national economy. Today, the median female share of the global workforce is 45.4 percent. Female leaders tend to be more inclusive and community-driven. They're more likely to lead by consensus, rather than try to dictate the rules. The 'feminine' leadership style wants others to be involved and take ownership of the goal so that everyone contributes. Companies with women in leadership roles outperform all-male teams by up to 66%. Women leaders have a variety of techniques for getting people on board, from using inspiring words to showing how their plans will benefit the bottom line.

b) Challenges Faced by Indian Women

The Rig Veda says, "The wife and husband, being the equal halves of one substance, are equal in every respect; therefore, both should join and take equal parts in all works, religious and secular." Likewise, the Upanishads clearly declare that "we individual souls are neither male nor female". However, women face a lot of peculiar difficulties

and problems in our society. Their sufferings know no bounds based on culture, religion or region. Let's look into some of these problems and challenges.

c) Survival is the first challenge for the girl child

Right from the time a girl child is conceived, she is the less preferred choice for the parents. Female feticide is the process of finding out the sex of the fetus and undergoing abortion if it is a girl. India has one of the highest female feticide incidents in the world. The female child population in the age group of 0-6 years declined from 78.83 million in 2001 to 75.84 million in 2011. Discrimination does not end with sex-selective abortion of female fetus. Brutal treatments of mother and newborn girls are reported, particularly in cases of higher birth order (when there are more than two in the family).

d) Health and nourishment

Girls who are granted the 'right to be born' are then denied the right to basic life sustaining nutrition and health. India is home to the largest proportion of malnourished children in the world, with widespread prevalence of stunting, wasting and people being overweight. Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen document that girls are breast-fed for a shorter period of time than boys. In contrast to the global trends, child mortality in India is higher for females than that for males. India's under-five mortality rates for males and females, stands at 38.4 and 40.4 respectively. Undernourished girls grow up to become undernourished mothers and give birth to potentially undernourished, low-birth-weight children, who are more susceptible to death and disease. If this inter-generational self-perpetuating cycle is not broken, the problem of malnutrition would continue to fester.

e) Educational opportunities

Given the prevailing influence of patriarchal values, right from their birth, a lot many girls bear the brunt of gender inequality or gender stereotypes and are treated inferiorly as compared to boys. Due to extreme taboos, lack of affordable sanitary napkins, lack of decent functioning toilets, and inadequate school infrastructure, several teenage girls of menstrual age lag in schooling. In fear of exploitation and abuse, many girls are not sent to school and kept at home only to be married off early. And even if they are not married off, the young girls are still denied a deserving education, quality healthcare, employment opportunities and equal rights. Recent national data reveals that the dropout rate for girls at the elementary level is 4.10% which rises to 16.88% at the secondary level, with the figures being substantially higher for girls from vulnerable groups (19.05% for SC and 24.4% for ST groups). According to the data released by Periodic Labor Force Survey 2018-19, the male literacy rate in India's urban areas (91.9%) outnumbers female literacy rate (82.6%) by 9.3%. Likewise, the male literacy rate in rural India (81.9%) outnumbers by 16.2% to that of female literacy rate (65.7%). Moreover, enrolment of male students in Engineering and Technology courses is 71.1%, while that of female students in the same courses is only 28.9% which speaks volumes about gender inequality.

f) Child marriage

Child marriage robs girls of their childhood as they step into adult roles that they are unprepared for – be it managing

households, bearing children, making decisions and so on. It not only hampers their schooling but also pushes young girls into early pregnancy which harms the health and nutrition of the teenage mother as well as her child. Out of the 12.15 million children married in India, 8.9 million are girls, and married girls are three times the boys. Rural girls constitute 55% of married children.

g) Right to bodily autonomy

Throughout their lives women are denied bodily autonomy. Bodily autonomy is the right to governance over our own bodies. The right of a woman or girl to make autonomous decisions about her own body and reproductive functions is at the very core of her fundamental right to equality and privacy. Equality in reproductive health includes access, without discrimination, to affordable, quality contraception, including emergency contraception. India has the highest number of women- 31 million- with an "unmet need" for contraception. The burden of using contraceptives falls mostly on women. Nearly 75.4% of married men in India currently use no method of contraception, as per the National Family Health Survey. Young men need to be convinced that male contraception is safer and simpler than female sterilization.

h) Violence against Women

Violence against women is experienced by women of all ages and social classes, all races, religions and nationalities across the world. The United Nations Declaration on Violence against Women identifies three areas in which violence commonly takes place: Physical, sexual and psychological violence that occurs in the family such as battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry-related violence and marital rape., within the general community such as rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere, trafficking in women and forced prostitution; and violence perpetrated or condoned by the State, wherever it occurs.

According to latest data released by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), India recorded 88 rape cases every day in 2019. These figures are likely to be just the tip of the iceberg as only a fraction of women who are raped file a complaint. It is reported that between 2014 and 2018, there have been 1,483 victims of acid attacks in the country.

i) Dowry and Bride Burning

It is another problem generally faced by women of low or middle class family during or after the marriage. Indian National Crime Bureau reports that the number of cases filed under the Dowry Prohibition Act witnessed a rise from 690 in 2018 to 739 in 2019. The number of dowry deaths saw a jump from 48 in 2018 to 52 in 2019.

j) Elderly Women's Challenges

Senior citizens in India face a number of challenges, but the situation is worse in case of elderly women. Old women who are single, abandoned or widowed face multiple barriers due to illiteracy, malnourishment, abuse, ill-health, lack of housing and exclusion from economic benefits. About 48.2 percent of elderly persons are women, out of whom 55 percent are widows. In the Global Age Watch

Index 2014, India ranks 71 among 96 countries in elderly (60 years plus) care.

k) Working Women's Challenges

In the era of 21st century, a woman wants equal opportunities as a man and the foremost challenge is how to balance work and home. Gender bias, unequal pay, mental and physical harassment and insufficient leave are some of the key issues of working woman at the workplace. Working women suffer from the phenomena of Glass ceiling where there is an unacknowledged barrier to advancement in a professional life. Currently, the number of women CEOs on the Fortune 500 list is just a dismal 38. And only three women on the list of Fortune 500 female CEOs are women of color.

Although working women handle their professional life in facing competition and challenges at work place and personnel life in managing household work, handle children, family, cooking, social responsibilities are still considered as the duty of women only. They have to take up a full day job plus handle all household activities that they handled as homemaker. This has also been referred to as 'The Second Shift'. Waking up early, ignoring her health issues and get all the stuffs ready for her family is big practical challenge. It is reported that on an average women have lost 2 hours of sleep per day. The belief of male superiority in the society also creates several hurdles for women at their workplace. Women discover that they must be much better than their male colleague to reach at the top. These types of problems make women less eager to progress in their career. Insufficient Maternity leave is also the cause of stress for working women as they have to take care of their baby as well as achieve the targets given to them in office.

There are many cases where women subordinates are asked for sexual favors from their male superiors in return of the promotion and growth granted to them. Unequal pay is another issue for working women. It has been observed that women are paid low salaries as compared to male employees. Although women prove themselves more efficient than male employees, most of the time they are not paid equally. This creates depression and demotivation in them which also affects her personnel life.

Poor security is another issue for working women at workplace. Women working in corporate sectors and other private organizations mostly face the various crimes at their workplace because of lack of security provided to them. If working women have to go for business tour or any training programs for their career development, then they have to take permission from the husband & family members. They also have to do proper arrangements for their children. But this is not the case for men in India. Working women are denied ownership of their labor. Their participation regarding how and where to spend their own salary is either negligible or completely absent.

l) Miscellaneous Challenges

This includes various challenges faced by women on religious, economic, political and social fronts. India belongs to a land where women are revered as 'Devi' or goddess yet they are denied entry to some religious places.

Women in India represent 29 percent of the labor force. Nearly half of India's women do not have a bank or savings accounts for their own use, and 60 percent of women have no valuable assets to their name. Women's household work (Care economy) is unpaid and undervalued; pink-collared jobs; feminization of agriculture and informal sector; entrepreneurship as a career option is not promoted.

India stands at the lower rung of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) 2018 rankings at 152 among 193 countries in women's representation in parliaments. Women make up 11.8% of the Lok Sabha and 11% of the 245-member Rajya Sabha. Women constitute only 9% of the State Assembly members and 5% of the State Council members. States like Mizoram and Nagaland have zero women MLAs. Women constitute only 7.28% of the police force in India according to the government data. Some key challenges faced in political empowerment of women include discrimination at party level regarding number of tickets (Sexual favors or compromises in lieu of party tickets/promotions); less number of women legislators; poor representation at legislatures; discrimination against women and sexual harassment against women. ILO 2018 report shows that on an average, women in India spent 297 minutes/day on unpaid care work against 31 minutes by men. In paid work, women spent 160 minutes compared to 360 minutes by men. Similarly, WEF Global Gender Gap report 2018 shows that on an average, 66% of women's work in India is unpaid compared to 12% of men. This again opens up vistas of inequality between genders in our country.

4. Initiatives taken by Government of India for Women Empowerment

To mainstream women and make women active agents of change in the society so as to achieve the Gender equality (SDG-5), the Government of India has initiated several programs for all-round development of women – economic empowerment, healthcare facilities, safety, education, skilling and training etc. Let us have a cursory glance into some of these initiatives.

4.1 Initiatives to Improve Female Work Participation

- a) **Safety of women at workplace**
The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 covers all women, irrespective of their age or employment status and protects them against sexual harassment at all workplaces both in public and private sector, whether organized or unorganized.
- b) **Working women's Hostels**
To promote availability of safe and conveniently located accommodation for working women, hostels have been established with day care facility for their children, wherever possible, in urban, semi urban, or even rural areas where employment opportunities for women exist.
- c) **Female Entrepreneurship**
To promote female entrepreneurship, the Government has initiated schemes like MUDRA, Stand Up India and Mahila e-Haat. Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana (MUDRA) extends a reduction of 25 bps in its interest

rates to MFIs / NBFCs, who are providing loans to women entrepreneurs. Stand Up India Scheme aims at promoting entrepreneurship among women and scheduled castes and tribes and Mahila E-Haat is an online marketing platform for women and women SHGs.

- d) **Prime Minister's Employment Generation Program (PMEGP)**
Under this program, women entrepreneurs are provided 25% and 35% subsidies for the projects set up in urban and rural areas respectively. Besides, Rashtriya Mahila Kosh provides micro-credit at concessional terms to poor women for various livelihood and income generating activities.
- e) **Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana**
National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) seeks to reach out to 8-9 crores of rural poor households and organize one-woman member from each household into affinity-based women SHGs and federations at village and at higher levels.
- f) **Swayatt, Stree Swabhiman and Nai Roshni Scheme**
Swayatt is an initiative to promote Start-ups, Women and Youth Advantage through e-transactions on Government e Marketplace (GeM). Under Stree Swabhiman, sanitary napkin micro manufacturing units are being set up at CSCs across India, particularly those operated by women entrepreneurs and Nai Roshni scheme is for economic empowerment and instilling confidence among minority women.

4.2 Initiatives to Improve Health of Women

- a) **National Health Mission (NHM)**
It focuses on Health System Strengthening, Reproductive Maternal-Neonatal-Child and Adolescent Health (RMNCH+A) and Communicable and Non-communicable Diseases. Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY) is a centrally sponsored scheme under NRHM which aims at reducing maternal and infant mortality by promoting institutional delivery among pregnant women.
- b) **Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)**
It encompasses various schemes under its ambit like Anganwadi Services –for holistic development of children under the age of 6 years and pregnant and lactating women, National Crèche Services –to provide a safe place for children of working mothers while they are at work. Thus, empowering them to take up employment; Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana – Providing partial compensation for the wage loss in terms of cash incentives so that the woman can take adequate rest before and after delivery of the first living child and Poshan Abhiyan – To reduce stunting, under-nutrition, low birth weight and anemia among children and women/adolescent girls.
- c) **Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY)**
The purpose of this scheme is to provide 8 crore deposit free LPG connections to women from BPL Households.
- d) **Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP)**
Joint Initiative of Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD), Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and Ministry of Human Resource Development to prevent gender biased sex selective elimination, ensure

survival and protection of the girl child, ensure education and participation of the girl child.

4.3 Initiatives for Education, Skilling and Training of Women

a) National Policy for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship 2015

For training and skill up-gradation of women in traditional, new and emerging areas to promote women employment in both organized and unorganized sectors. Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana is to bridge the skill gap that prevents India's rural poor from competing in the modern market.

b) Support to Training and Employment Programme for Women (STEP)

MWCD launched this program in the year 1986, for training and employment for women below poverty line in traditional sectors like agriculture, small animal husbandry, dairying, fisheries etc. where women are employed on a large scale. Its basic aim is to upgrade skills of women for self and wage employment.

c) Vigyan Jyoti and Sukanya Samruddhi Yojana

Vigyan Jyoti is to encourage the women to pursue science and to create a level-playing field for the meritorious girls in high school to pursue Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) in their higher education. Sukanya Samruddhi Yojana is to motivate parents to open an account in the name of a girl child to meet the requirement of higher education expense.

d) Project Cyber Shiksha and NARI Portal

Microsoft and Data Security Council of India (DSCI) in association with MeitY have launched Project Cyber Shiksha for skilling women engineering graduates in the niche field of Cyber Security and NARI portal is to serve as a single window access to information and services on various women centric schemes/legislation.

4.4 Initiatives for Safety of Women

a) SHe-Box, CCPWC and Nirbhaya Fund

Sexual Harassment electronic-Box (SHe-Box) is an online complaint management system for registering complaints related to sexual harassment at the workplace by women, including government and private employees. Once a complaint is submitted to the SHe-Box portal, it directly reaches the concerned authority having jurisdiction to take action in the matter. Cyber Crime Prevention against Women and Children (CCPWC) is an online cybercrime reporting portal launched to enable public to report complaints pertaining to child pornography/ child sexual abuse material, rape/gang rape imageries or sexually explicit content. Nirbhaya Fund is a dedicated non-lapsable corpus fund for implementation of initiatives aimed at enhancing the safety and security of women in the country.

b) Sakhi One Stop Centre (OSC) and Women Helpline Scheme

Sakhi OSC is to facilitate access to an integrated range of services including police, medical, legal, psychological support and temporary shelter to women affected by violence and Women Helpline Scheme is 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 family, community, workplace, etc.

c) Swadhar Greh

This scheme aims to provide basic necessities to marginalized women and girls who are living in difficult circumstances without any economic or social support. Under this scheme women are provided with emotional support and counselling. The target group is mainly women who are victim of violence or survivors of natural disaster, trafficked women, and women without no families.

d) UJJAWALA Scheme

The scheme aims to prevent trafficking and provide support for rescue, rehabilitation, reintegration and repatriation of women and child victims of trafficking from commercial sexual exploitation in India. The Scheme is being implemented mainly through NGOs to provide direct aid and benefit to the victims of trafficking.

To conclude, it is worthwhile to mention here that while looking back at the last four decades we can say with a fair amount of certainty that women's position in Indian society has changed. This change has been to women's advantage. There has no doubt been a wider recognition of women's rights, several steps taken towards equality among genders as well as a greater sensitivity towards gender discrimination. Investment in basic social infrastructure and services such as education, health, food security and nutrition, social protection, legal empowerment and poverty alleviation programs will continue to be of paramount importance.

5. Way Forward

An integrated approach is needed along with women-centric policy making where women are not treated as passive beneficiaries but are seen as potential contributors to society. The political landscape and structures should facilitate women's participation as both voters and representatives. Along with legislations like the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, Maternity Benefit Act and social sensitization towards the issues of women is important. Besides, measures for increasing education levels should be balanced with the creation of jobs, the development of responsible and sensitive workplaces, along with a positive change in the stereotypical gender roles.

India has shown a dedicated will to bring changes by pledging to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals which include ideals of gender justice and women empowerment. Only with constructive planning and comprehensive changes at various levels of society can the new emerging 'women' be able to realize their complete potential in India. While we may walk few miles towards women empowerment, the road is a longer one. Empowering women is the key to our tomorrow, our future.

Manusmriti rightly quotes, "Where Women are honored, divinity blossoms there, and where ever women are

dishonored, all action no matter how noble it may be, remains unfruitful.”

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