

Women Empowerment through Employment

Jyoti Sharma¹, Pooja Sharma²

¹Lecturer, Mittal Girls College, Sardarshahar

²Research Scholar (P.HD), Rajasthan University, Jaipur

The present scenario of women's empowerment in developing countries calls for greater participation and decision-making in the economic, political and social spheres. In the economic sphere, paid employment is seen as essential to women's empowerment. Research on the relationship between employment and empowerment often focus on access to employment opportunities and working conditions at the societal level and on women's control over resources and contribution to family earnings. Women empowerment is typically discussed in relation to political, social and economic empowerment, but the economic empowerment of women has received particular attention and is often cited as one of the most important ways to promote gender equality, reduce poverty and improve the well being of not only women, but children as well. The assumption that there is a link between employment and women's empowerment, both in terms of economic and gender relations is widely accepted. Women started availing themselves of employment opportunities; they are no longer associated with the role of 'homemaker' especially in urban areas. A greater proportion of women are seeking and obtaining paid employment more than ever before. Greater availability of educational opportunities, removal of discriminatory clauses in labour legislation and change in legal status of women, delay in marriage and having fewer children, changing socio-cultural values, consciousness about their rights and greater awareness of women relating to their career development are some of the important reasons which is leading to gradual number of women in the employment market.

A noteworthy feature of the Northeastern States in the employment sector is that the female work participation in this region is very high. Compared to 26% of the female work force participation rate in India, most of the Northeastern States (except Assam and Tripura) have higher than 35% in 2001. Mizoram stands at 1st position with 47.5% and Nagaland in 7th position with 38.1 % (source: Meghalaya State Development Report) Economic empowerment constitutes one of the fundamental building blocks in efforts towards the overall empowerment of women. Working especially in paid employment labour is important to empowerment and that women who work have a greater likelihood of higher empowerment than those woman that do not. In the present modern societies, women engaged in a job outside the family and obtaining good salary or income are more respected than women without a gainful job. As far as women are concerned, their self esteem and power within the family too should increase as they function as productive wage-earners. Employment of women outside the home helps them to become more confident and courageous. It gives them scope to become career-conscious and inspires them to make

accomplishments independent of family roles. Access to earned incomes improve women's position within the household substantially, gives them greater control over the distribution of such earnings and household resources, and generally improves their status and strength in society. Where women are generally denied the ownership of property and control over assets, the ability to earn outside income can become an important instrument for the transformation of gender relations and challenge many traditional modes of social and economic relations and can lead to significant social change in the long run.

Some studies have also revealed that when a woman provides sole financial support for her family, employment even in a low status occupation has a positive effect on her self esteem. During the recent years, women are also availing higher educational level which has increased their eligibility to get into high-level jobs and power positions. It could be said that an ever increasing number of women are entering the world of employment as wage-earners, salaried professionals and individual entrepreneurs'. This new trend has added greater momentum to the process of social change and social mobility which have been taking place in our society. But, in spite of this change in the trend towards women's employment, we still find glaring differences between the status of women and men. With the increase in the number of working women, a new arena has opened up in which the violation of human rights and the dignity of women are challenged. Most of our customary laws are discriminatory in nature. The provisions generally are biased against the women. Women's civil rights are restricted and the economic rights are either not conferred to them or if conferred, they are less than adequate. Each such incident results in the violation of fundamental rights of gender equality and the right to life and property.

Since property laws were not in favour of women for hundreds of years, women do not seem to possess property of their own. For some working women who receive income, they end up handing it over to their menfolk, who take the final decision on spending it. Economic dependence of women on men still continues and this dependence weakens them economically. Besides, majority of our women are unaware of their rights and very less women have the chance of inheriting their husband's property and only a few get a share of their father's property. It can also be said that majority of our women are happy with their family life and do not cherish any ambition relating to social, economic and public life. Most of our women do not prefer to take decisions on important matters but leave them to their menfolk's discretion. Besides, the cultural constraints on women's employment and empowerment can be traced to the deep-rooted images of

traditional women's role, stereotyped perceptions, moral and religious values which are derogatory to women, prioritization of family over career and conflict between career and family, marriage and motherhood and geographical immobility of women. Thus, our women are not completely free from the hold of the customs.

Women cannot be empowered in a magical manner. It is a spontaneous process but requires deliberate and consistent efforts. It appears that the societal approach towards women, their roles and status have not radically changed. Hence, bringing about more and more legislation to ensure better opportunities to grant more rights and concessions is of no benefit unless there is a basic change in the people's attitude towards women and women's role in society. There is no legal or constitutional barrier to equality, there is only the social barrier. Apart from employment, society should also recognize that like men, women are also entitled to equal rights and women should have freedom to take decisions and make choices. Sufficient economic freedom is a must for women to lessen their dependence on man and to stand on their own feet on par with men. Women can become stronger only with educational and economic power. Mere expectations cannot help. We, women yearn for a 'respectable' and 'meaningful' social status. We want our interests and rights to be protected; we do expect greater freedom, self-dependence, and proper treatment by our menfolk and a socio-economic environment, free from all types of exploitation, which will definitely influence our social status and the socio-economic conditions in the coming days.

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