

## EMPOWERING WOMEN FOR A BETTER INDIA

Pooja Sharma

It is a proven fact that by promoting gender equality, a nation can reap rich dividends in all fields. A report by McKinsey Global Institute states that India could boost its GDP by 60 per cent by 2025 — if it were to use the full potential of women in its workforce by bridging the gender gap at workplace.

**P**rogress level of a society can be judged by a simple parameter – how it treats its women. A casual look at Human Development Index (HDI) makes it very clear that the countries with highest HDI rankings are the one that have highest gender equality.

Indian society with its myriad complexities is unique in the world. Its approach towards women has been contradictory at best. At one end our society proclaims, 'gods reside in places where woman is worshipped', on the other it calls her 'maya' that leads the people astray. Though these philosophical pronouncements often remain at the center of debates on women's rights, truth is that, they do not really influence the women's condition much in our society. If we observe the social life closely, we find that women have respectable place in family as mothers or grandmothers or wives. But, apart from these traditional roles, there is hardly any place for them as independent individuals in a traditional family. This is where women's freedom gets restricted and she is often denied the liberty and rights that her male counterparts enjoy.

It is a proven fact that by promoting gender equality, a nation can reap rich dividends in all fields. A report by McKinsey Global Institute states that India could boost its GDP by 60 per cent by 2025 — if it were to use the full potential of women in its workforce by bridging the gender gap at workplace. For Indian women to realise their full potential, first step will be education and skill development. For that, special thrust needs to be given to educate the girl child. In this respect 'Beti Bachao- Beti Padhao' scheme may prove transformative. Also, attention needs to be given to all those factors that deteriorate the quality of a women's life. Women safety is one such issue, others being lack of access to clean fuel which adversely affects their health. Also, worries of

marriage expenses start stalking Indian parents from the day a girl is born to them. If we have to improve the situation of women, these issues need to be addressed. Present Government has proactively taken a number of initiatives for this which are described below-



### *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP)*

*Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao* (BBBP) scheme was launched by the Prime Minister on 22 January 2015 in Haryana's Panipat, district, which has one of the lowest sex ratios in the country. This scheme focuses on the-

- i. survival,
- ii. protection and
- iii. education of the girl child

It aims to address the issue of declining Child Sex Ratio (CSR) through a mass campaign across the country, targeted at changing societal mindsets & creating awareness about the criticality of the issue. Initially the Scheme was focused in 100 districts with low Child Sex Ratio. Now it has been expanded to 61 more districts.

The criteria for selection of initial 100 districts under the programme was like this-

- i) 87 districts having Child Sex Ratio below the National average of 918.
- ii) 8 Districts having Child Sex Ratio above National average of 918 but showing declining trend
- iii) 5 Districts having Child Sex Ratio above National average of 918 and showing improving trend so that other parts of country can learn from them.

This scheme is a joint initiative of-

- Ministry of Women and Child Development
- Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and
- Ministry of Human Resource Development

The project is with 100 per cent Central Assistance and the guidelines of the scheme focus on following areas-

- Strict enforcement of Pre-Conception & Pre Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PC & PNDT) Act
- Awareness and advocacy campaign
- Gender equality has been integrated in the school curriculum including the textbooks published by the NCERT to instill a sense of gender justice from an early age
- To promote elementary education among girls, the **Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA)** provides for-
  - the opening of schools in the neighborhood to make access easier for girls
  - the appointment of additional teachers including women teachers
  - free textbooks, free uniforms, separate toilets for girls
  - teachers' sensitisation programmes to promote girls participation
  - gender-sensitive teaching learning materials including textbooks and
  - the scheme of *Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas* as residential upper primary schools for girls belonging to SC/ST/Minority Communities, BPL families and girls in difficult circumstances

Similar initiatives have been initiated under the **Rashtriya Madyamik Shiksha Abhiyan (RMSA)** to improve girl education at secondary level.

### Challenges in *Beti Bacho-Bati Padhao*

- Unsafe social environment can destroy a girl's chance of getting education. It is a common sight to see boys standing outside a college and passing lewd remarks on girls. This makes some parents apprehensive to send their daughters to schools.
- Dowry is a big social evil. This needs to be dealt legally and socially.
- Preventing Child marriage through compulsory registration of marriages
- A tradition needs to be developed for celebrating the birth of the girl child
- Medical fraternity is also responsible for female foeticide. Ethics in medical profession and education needs to be strengthened.

### **Sukanya Samridhi Yojna (Girl Child Prosperity Scheme)**

We know that parents in India always worry about the marriage and education expenses of their daughters. Also, the girls are often discriminated and do not get their equitable share in the family savings. To address these problems, PM launched a special deposit scheme- '*Sukanya Samridhi Yojana*', as part of the '*Beti Bachao-Beti Padhao*' campaign. This is an effort to motivate parents to open an account in the name of a girl child. Features of the scheme are-

- a savings account can be opened by the parents or legal guardian of a girl of less than 10 years, with a minimum deposit of Rs 1,000
- the account can be opened in any post office or authorised branches of commercial banks.
- interest rate: 9.1 per cent compounded annually
- the minimum deposit in a year is Rs 1,000 and the maximum Rs 1.5 lakh
- the account will remain operative for 21 years from the date of opening or marriage of the girl child after attaining 18 years of age. 18 years deadline will help preventing child-marriages
- she can withdraw 50 per cent of the money after reaching age of 18 for higher education

## PAHAL (*Pratyaksh Hanstantrit Labh- Direct Benefit Transfer*) scheme

Leakage of subsidies meant for poor and needy has been a big concern for the Governments. At one hand, it deprives the deserving person from her entitlement and on the other, it puts undue burden on the Government's finances. In this regard, LPG subsidy presents a classic case.

We know that the Government provides LPG subsidy only for household cooking gas, and not on LPG cylinders meant for commercial use. So, unscrupulous elements create bogus LPG connections and receive subsidised LPG cylinder and then these cylinders are used in commercial settings or sold in black market.

Solution to this problem lies in Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT). In this, a household user buys gas cylinder at market price and receives subsidy amount in his bank account. This has led to elimination of bogus connections and substantial gain to exchequer.

Direct Benefit Transfer for LPG consumer (DBTL) scheme called, 'PAHAL', was first launched on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2013 and finally covered 291 districts. It required the consumer to mandatorily have an Aadhaar number for availing LPG Subsidy. The government has comprehensively reviewed the scheme after examining the difficulties faced by the consumer. The modified scheme was re-launched in 54 districts on 15 November, 2014 and in remaining districts of the country on 1<sup>st</sup> January, 2015.

LPG consumers, who join the PAHAL scheme, will get the LPG cylinders at market price and receive LPG subsidy amount directly into their bank accounts.

Other facts about the scheme are-

- DBTL is designed to ensure that LPG subsidy reaches the domestic customer directly and is not diverted illegally for commercial use. In this process public money will be saved.
- Consumers will receive SMS at every stage in the scheme, informing them about their status in the scheme
- Camps are being set up at various banks, and LPG distributor's premises to enable LPG consumers to open bank account and enroll for Aadhaar, if they need to do so.

- This is the first time in the history of the country that the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas would implement a welfare scheme
- In 2015, PAHAL was recognised by Guinness Book of World Records as the largest cash transfer programme in the world.

## *Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana*

In our country, the spread of LPG cylinders has been predominantly in the urban/semi-urban middle class and affluent households. The poor have limited access to cooking gas (LPG). But there are serious health hazards associated with the cooking based on fossil fuels. According to WHO estimates, about 5 lakh deaths in India alone are due to unclean cooking fuels. In this, women are the worst sufferers as traditionally they are the one who cook for the whole family. Indoor air pollution also causes acute respiratory illnesses in young children.

It is essential to provide LPG connections to BPL households and ensure universal coverage of cooking gas in the country. This will empower the poor women, who currently spend an inordinate time on collecting firewood and cooking meals. It will protect their health and also provide employment for rural youth in the supply chain of cooking gas.

With an aim to provide free cooking gas connections to five crore BPL families in next three years, *Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana* was launched by the PM on 1<sup>st</sup> May at Ballia, Uttar Pradesh. The Scheme provides a financial support of Rs 1600 for each LPG connection to the BPL households. The identification of eligible BPL families will be made in consultation with the State Governments and the Union Territories. Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas would implement this welfare scheme.

## *Mobile App 'Himmat'*

Though women safety has always been a perennial concern but with the advancements in technology, many options have opened up. Mobile app is one. Delhi Police launched its own app for women safety named '*Himmat*' on 1<sup>st</sup> January, 2015. This application is launched basically for the employed women who travel alone sometimes late at night.

Idea behind the app is to provide safety to women in distress situation. It is important to enable them to send out distress signal to a family member or the police when they feel any risk.

The *Himmat* app can be downloaded from the Delhi Police website - [www.delhipolice.nic.in](http://www.delhipolice.nic.in) free of cost. The user can send an alert by shaking her phone or by pressing the power button. As soon as the distress button is pressed,

- it will trigger a 30-second audio and video recording on the phone which will be relayed to the Police Control Room (PCR)
- the woman will get a call back from the PCR
- an SMS alert will also be sent to a minimum of five friends and relatives of the user
- a status will be posted on her Facebook and Twitter timeline, which will be connected to the app

### Panic Button in Mobile Phones

The fact is that, a woman in distress may not have more than just a few seconds to send out a distress message, so a physical panic button is much superior to having an App on the mobile phone.

Hence, Department of Telecommunications has notified the rules on panic button, under the Indian Wireless Telegraph Act 1933 in April, 2016. As per the rules-

- starting from 1<sup>st</sup> January, 2017, all phones will have the facility of panic button
- in normal phones, numeric key 5 or 9 will be configured as panic button
- in smart phones the panic button configured to three times short pressing of the on-off button.
- Further, from 1<sup>st</sup> January, 2018, all mobile phones will be required to have the facility of identifying the location through satellite based GPS.

The Ministry of Women and Child Development is also working with the Department of Telecommunications and the stakeholders to ensure that similar solutions be made available for existing mobile phones. This can be done through some software patches which will configure same buttons to send distress signal.

Though these initiatives are laudable, but mobile based security features have their limitations too. First, not every woman in India has a mobile or smartphone. In rural areas, conservative parents and society are still reluctant to provide girls with mobile phones. Many a time, cast Panchayats have issued feudal diktats that young girls should not be provided mobiles, as they consider mobile the main culprit behind many love affairs and elopements. Other than this feudal mindset, poverty also stops women from buying mobiles. So we can fairly believe that these mobile based safety mechanisms would primarily help urban, educated and working women.

Second issue is about trustworthiness of these measures. Police reported that in first four months of the launch, 3,416 complaints were received on *Himmat* app, out of which only 45 were genuine. Reason – people just dialed the SOS number after downloading the app as they wanted to ensure that the app was working and that police action would be taken. Out of Delhi, in most of the places, people complain that police reaches the crime scene late. So, how swiftly police acts on these distress calls, would decide the effectiveness of these mobile based safety measures for women.

### One Stop Centre for Women affected by violence

Under this scheme, One Stop Centres will be established across the country to provide integrated support (medical, legal, and psychological support) under one roof to women affected by violence.

The scheme is being implemented since 1st April 2015 and is funded under Nirbhaya Fund. The first One Stop Centre has been set up at Raipur, Chhattisgarh on 16th July, 2015.

Focus on women empowerment by present government is laudable. But this is inherently a social issue and governments don't really have much leverage there. Still, sustained campaign can make a difference. PM's '**Selfie with the Daughter**' campaign was a huge success. More such initiatives are required to change the social attitude towards women.

*(Author is a Delhi based freelancer. Email: [poojasharma2714@gmail.com](mailto:poojasharma2714@gmail.com))*