

Women's Empowerment in the Indian Context

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Most countries today consider gender equality and women's empowerment to be essential for the development and well-being of families, communities and nations. No nation, society, and family can flourish and be happy if fifty per cent of its population, i.e. women and girls, are not respected, free and happy.

Not just in India, but in most countries of the world, women have been discriminated against, excluded from decision making at all levels, marginalised and disempowered. This is so because of the prevalence of patriarchy, a social system in which men are considered to be superior to women and in which, men have more control over resources, decision making and ideology. In patriarchy, violence against women is a part of the system. Women are controlled through violence or the threat of violence. According to the UN, one out of every three women experiences violence. This means over one billion women and girls experience violence. This is the biggest war going on in the world and what is most painful is that most of it takes place within the family.

Women: Bottom of All Hierarchies

It is indeed difficult to generalise about women in India because of the vast differences between them. They belong to different classes, castes, religions, communities. Yet, one can say that most women suffer from patriarchal structures and ideologies; they experience gender inequalities and subordination. Women lag behind their men in all indicators of social and human development. India has the most adverse sex-ratios for women in the world. Life expectancy for women is lower than that of men, women's health, nutritional and educational levels are significantly lower than that of men. Women are concentrated in low skilled and low paid jobs, they get lower wages and lower income than men and they hardly own and/or control property and means of production. The number of female headed households has been increasing and they are amongst the poorest in our countries. The participation of women in political and social decision-making is abysmally low. Women's participation in the Parliament has never been higher than 10 per cent. They are excluded from rural authority. They have little say in the formulation of social, economic,

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legal, political rules which govern their lives and keep them subjugated.

Not in all, but in large parts of India, girls live with disadvantages, burdens and fears. They carry the burden of neglect, of discrimination, the burden of household work, the burden of looking after siblings, the burden of work outside the home. Girls live with fears - fear of being aborted, fear of being poisoned, fear of being neglected and allowed to die, fear of not getting adequate affection, care, nourishment, medical attention, education. Our daughters also live with the fear of sexual abuse ranging from playful manhandling to rape. Even after the passing of stricter and better laws, the number of brutal gang rapes has been increasing. After marriage, they face the fear of loneliness, maladjustment, mental and physical torture.

As a result of the pressure created by the women's movement and actions by governments and civil society organizations, there have indeed been some positive changes for women, for example - there is growing gender awareness as a result of which, women's subordination is recognised and the need to challenge it is accepted by all; violence against women is recognised and condemned; women's participation in all decision making bodies is seen as important. There have been improvements in some legal provisions, in educational and job opportunities for women, policy statements have become more gender sensitive. There is some increase in the number of women participating in government and non-government development agencies and programmes and women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions has increased. Our governments have set-up women's bureaus, commissions, departments and/or ministries to look into gender issues. However, we still have a long way to go to achieve gender equality.

Empowerment: Dynamic and Political Process

In order to move towards gender equality, we have to empower that

gender which is disempowered, i.e., women and girls. One needs to understand POWER in order to empower anyone. Power is the capacity or ability to take actions freely and independently, it is the capacity to control or influence others. Power means autonomy, freedom, making your own choices, having a voice.

In human societies, power is derived from control over resources and ideology. People who control resources and ideology (people's thinking, belief systems etc.) become the decision makers and controllers of families, communities and countries.

Women's empowerment, therefore, would require changing patriarchal thinking and structures, giving women control over resources (natural, human,

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intellectual, financial, inner resources), bringing them into decision making roles etc.

According to me, empowerment of women will improve our lives only if our notion of power is different from the present notion of power.

Empowerment for us cannot mean power over others, power to control more than our share; it should mean power to be, power to control one's own greed, avarice, violence; power to nurture, heal, care for others; power to fight for justice, ethics, morality;

power to achieve inner growth leading to wisdom and compassion.

Women's empowerment is a process, which is both on-going and dynamic and which enhances women's ability to change those structures and ideologies which keep them subordinate. This process enables them to gain more access to and control over resources and decision-making; gain more control over their own lives, gain more autonomy. It is a process which enables women to have self-respect and dignity, which improves their self image and social image.

The process of empowerment is a political process, because it aims at changing existing power relationships between women and men.

The goal of women's empowerment cannot and should not just be to change hierarchical gender relations, but to change all hierarchical relations in society i.e., class, caste, race, ethnic, and North-South relations. Because gender relations do not operate in a vacuum, because they are related to and influenced by all other economic, social and political systems, one cannot change gender hierarchies without changing other systems and hierarchies.

Women's empowerment is not and cannot be separate from the empowerment of nature, empowerment of all the marginalised people and countries. Women's struggles and movements therefore, need to be closely linked to peace movements, ecology movements, workers' and peasants' movements, human rights movements and movements for democratisation and decentralisation of society. These different movements are different aspects of the same struggle, different segments of the same dream; therefore, there need to be strong connections and alliances between them.

I believe that while talking of empowerment of women, we must also talk about empowerment of feminist thinking and ideology, empowerment of principles like

equality, justice, democracy and sustainability. This means, we do not support all women irrespective of what they stand for. We do not empower women dictators, women patriarchs, women who promote caste and patriarchy, just because they are women. We recognize that women can also be patriarchal and dominating and that some men can be and are our partners in fighting patriarchy and other hierarchical systems. Our struggle is for certain principles and for a society where all men and women have equal opportunities to live; to grow, to participate.

Not just women, but women's perspectives need to be empowered because women are not just a separate sector. Women's concerns, perspectives and visions are necessary on every issue - be it militarisation, human rights or sustainable development. Every issue is a woman's issue.

Empowerment of women has to be done at all levels and in all sections if it is to become strong and wide spread and make a difference. Effective networking is required between grass-root level women activists, intermediary level activists, women in the government, media women, women politicians, women academics, women artists, women entrepreneurs, etc. We need networking between those working at the micro level, and those working at the macro level. We also need support from sympathetic men at all levels.

Empowerment of women is not a one way process - in which some activists can go and empower others. It is a two way process in which we empower and get empowered. This is an ongoing journey for all of us. No one can become empowered for good and then become an expert in empowering others.

Women's empowerment has to be multidimensional and integrative. This process may include some or all of the following:

- Making women's contribution to society visible; i.e. showing

that women, in addition to being deliverers of children and homemakers, are farmers, labourers, artisans, professionals, etc. They have always been involved in production, and their contribution to GDP has always been major. They are producers of life itself, managers of natural resources etc.

- Making women and society recognize the knowledge, capabilities and skills that women have had and still have, particularly in areas of agriculture, health, handicrafts, etc.
- Creating a social environment which gives women self-esteem and self-confidence.

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- Providing opportunities for girls and women to realise their full potential and to have choices and not to be pushed into only a few traditional roles and occupations. Giving them an education which empowers rather than domesticates.
- Enabling women to take decisions about their own lives; whether, when and whom to marry, whether and when to have children, whether and what to study. Also, to take decisions about family matters,

community and national affairs. Enhancing women's political participation at all levels.

- Facilitating awareness amongst women and men about girls and women's genuine needs, their status within and outside the family, their rights and responsibilities.
- Making facilities and resources available to women to meet their basic needs of food, clothing, shelter and their special needs in health and security.
- Helping women gain access to and control over means of production, property and other resources and control over income.

Issues Needing Special Attention and Efforts

It is important to point out some areas which are crucial for women's empowerment, but which have not been given adequate attention in the past. These areas need to be looked at very carefully and effective strategies have to be developed to deal with them.

Women's lack of control over property and other productive resources is an important reason for women's inferior status. It is this which makes women feel insecure all the time. In her book "*A Field of One's Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*" Bina Agarwal has very convincingly argued that gender gap in the ownership and control over property is the single most important factor affecting women's economic well being, social status and empowerment. This issue needs to be addressed urgently at all levels.

Lack of access to gainful employment is another important issue. While much stress is laid on who brings in the cash, women are denied opportunities of learning and developing skills to bring in cash, and to be gainfully employed. Women's household work is not valued and if they do not bring in cash they are devalued, considered a burden, a liability. Research done by Professor

Amartya Sen and Professor Jean Dreze has come to the conclusion that greater involvement with outside work and paid employment does tend to go with less anti-female bias in intra family distribution. Therefore, they suggest that female participation in "gainful" economic activity is a material factor in combating the special deprivation of women in many parts of the world. In India, we have talked a lot about income generation activities for women, but most of these have failed to help women. They have increased women's work load without enhancing their income much. This issue needs a careful consideration.

Sharing of household and child rearing work is another area which needs to be looked into because that is where maximum subordination of women is located. Women slog all the time, have no leisure, no opportunity to study, to grow. This is a big hurdle in the path of women's equality and empowerment. Women's drudgery can only be reduced if others in the family share their work. Boys and men should share mothering, caring, nurturing activities to provide time to women to rest, to have time for themselves, to develop other interests.

Control over women's sexuality is another area which needs to be studied, understood and addressed. Early marriages, purdah, restrictions on women's mobility, which are all ways of controlling women's sexuality, have drastic implications for the freedom and autonomy of girls and women.

The other important area to be addressed is that of ideology which justifies and perpetuates patriarchal structures, practices and behaviour patterns. Media are a powerful creator of ideology and we all know how sexist and anti-women most media have been and are. Considerable amount of work has been done to change media images of women but unfortunately things have only become worse.

Religion is also a creator of patriarchal ideology. Religious texts and mythologies, religious and cultural customs which preach and justify male superiority also need to be challenged much more than we have done in the past. This is indeed an area which we should tread cautiously. It is an area which will not change overnight but if we keep silent about it, it will never change. Religions which justify caste, class, gender hierarchies cannot be accepted uncritically in the present day and time. Religious laws and practices which go against our Constitution, which deny women their fundamental

We need education which will help women not only to read and understand the word but to read, understand and control our world; which will help women not only to master the three Rs but to be masters of their own lives and makers of their destinies.

rights need to be challenged. What and how we do this very sensitive task needs to be discussed and planned carefully to avoid hurting sentiments and back lash.

Education for Women's Empowerment

Education of women is indeed the most important component and intervention for women's empowerment, provided both the contents and methodology of this education are pro-women.

The Kind of Education We Need

We have to strengthen and multiply those ongoing efforts to educate women, to acquire information and knowledge which help them challenge patriarchal knowledge, norms, values, behaviour patterns. We need education which will help women not only to read and understand the word but to read, understand and control our world; which will help women not only to

master the three Rs., but to be masters of their own lives and makers of their destinies. We need education which will help women acquire the necessary analytical skills to understand the fast changing realities of life; which will give them the confidence and strength to refuse to submit to conditions of indignity and inhumanity. If we are involved with women's literacy then literacy classes for women should become nuclei for consciousness raising. They should help women form strong groups so that they can gain more and more control over their lives, help them break their silence, make them visible. These classes should create an atmosphere which allows women more freedom, which gives them more opportunities to realise their full human potential. Education for women's empowerment will have to be an ongoing process of collective action and reflection. Our educational efforts should be built on women's existing knowledge and skills; they should affirm women, bring out the best in each one of them.

The methodology of women's education has to be participatory and non-hierarchical. Women must be involved in setting their own agenda and priorities, their own pace of learning. The educational process should make them feel good about themselves, build their confidence and self-respect, unleash their creativity, make them feel energetic and joyous; in one word - EMPOWER them.

We need education which will not only help in the search and acquisition of new skills and knowledge, but also help the participants acquire and strengthen values like justice, equality, honesty, truthfulness and solidarity amongst oppressed groups. It should also create or release energies in women to act with conviction and courage in their various struggles at different levels.

We need education which will not lead to more competition and ambition, but which will create trust and solidarity amongst women. It

should help them form associations and networks at different levels.

It should help women develop an analytical and questioning mind and a scientific approach to understand the realities around them. It should help them see the connections between micro and macro realities, between micro realities and macro policies, between the local and the global.

Just to reiterate, women's empowerment must accompany the empowerment of human values. Only then there will be more equality, justice and peace around us.

Women's empowerment will take place at a rapid pace only when men understand that it will be good for men also and it will be good for families and nations. Let us remember that. □

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Beneficiaries of Supplementary Nutrition Programme under ICDS Increase

The number of beneficiaries [children (6 months to 6 years) and pregnant and lactating mothers] for supplementary nutrition under ICDS scheme of Ministry of Women and Child Development have increased from 956.12 lakh to 1030.14 lakh and Number of beneficiaries [children (3-6 years) for pre-school education increased from 353.29 lakh to 354.05 lakh during the last four years. Similarly, Anganwadi Centres have also increased from 1338732 to 1349091 during the same period.

Government of India approved the Restructuring and Strengthening of ICDS Scheme recently. The goals and target of restructured and strengthened ICDS are (i) to prevent and reduce young child under nutrition by 10 per cent points in 0-3 years and enhance early development and learning outcomes in all children below six years of age (ii) improved care and nutrition of girls and women and to reduce anaemia prevalence in young children, girls and women by 1/5th and (iii) achieve time bound goals and outcomes with results based monitoring of indicators at different levels.

Care & Nutrition counselling [including (i) Infant & Young Child Feeding (IYCF) Promotion and Counselling, (ii) Maternal Care and Counselling, (iii) Care, Nutrition, Health & Hygiene Education and (iv) Community based care and management of underweight children] and Health Services [including (i) Immunization and micronutrient supplementation, (ii) Health Check-up and (iii) Referral Services] for children in the age group of 0-6 years and Pregnant and Lactating mothers, have now been included in the core package of ICDS services.

Integrated Child Development Services [ICDS] Scheme is a centrally sponsored Scheme being implemented by the State Governments/UT Administrations.

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