

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AT GRASSROOT LEVEL

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ABSTRACT

Empowerment is needed more at the grass root levels, the bottom level of the economic pyramid of India. Women in particular need that extra empowerment because they have been ignored as having no ability to contribute to society. The world has been patriarchal in the past. It is now time to change the socio-economic disparity. Women entrepreneurship must be encouraged as there is no specific education required and most women are skilful in some way or other.

Our national building efforts must have complete gender equality.

Empowerment is a big challenge for India. Empowerment of all persons especially the marginalized like minorities, tribal, women, people living below the poverty line is the urgent need of the day. There is structural and systematic discrimination due to the culture of domination, marginalization and exclusion based on formal and informal practices. Market centered and profit-driven practices have led to exploitation and cheap labor.

It is the responsibility of Central Government and State Governments together with civil society to safeguard the rights of all. There is an urgent need to strengthen institutional mechanisms to encourage and strengthen people from grass root levels to make the people our country fully empowered.

KEYWORDS: *Empowerment, Minorities, Tribal, Women*

INTRODUCTION

Women Empowerment at Grassroots Level

It is difficult to give the word 'empowerment' a concrete definition as there are many dimensions to it and is very dynamic. Empowerment may mean different things to different communities around the world.

However empowerment, as we understand it in the context of present times, is to have access to all opportunities and facilities that enable a person to unleash inherent talent, imagination and enthusiasm to be the best and to produce goods and services to achieve and contribute to society without impediments. Empowerment is defined as, "the process of becoming stronger and more confident especially in controlling one's life and claiming one's rights" (Oxford Dictionary). Empowerment means that there is no constraints of finances, space or society taboos for any person who has a vision and plan to pursue a goal. There should be no attempt to thwart or deny prevalent opportunities on the basis of religion, finances, caste or gender. It is seen that marginalize people are often denied opportunities. Empowerment means to provide encouragement and facilities to all by government and society. An empowered person proceeds fearlessly to pursue any dream, business or goal as well as to earn profit, appreciation, and recognition. Empowerment is needed more by the poor,

marginalized and minorities rather than the rich who are already empowered. Empowerment includes a variety of techniques to stimulate strengths and encourage individuals and groups to be their best.

Various types of empowerment are required for various purposes. Some of the largely used ones are:

- **Economic Empowerment:** Financial aid or help people acquire finances for purposes like entrepreneurship.
- **Political Empowerment:** Educating people at grassroots about their rights and responsibilities like voting, participating in matters of national interest or participating in politics if so desired.
- **Cultural Empowerment:** Exposure to various cultures prevalent in our countries like language, food, clothing, religion, music, dances of other regions and states.
- **Societal Empowerment:** Teaching members at grass root level as to how to be involved in community activities. Also informing them of gender equality, respecting other religions and beliefs.
- **Legal Empowerment:** Teaching people about their rights and how to exercise their rights.
- **National Empowerment:** Ensuring that no person is left out in being empowered.

Empowerment creates awareness of strengths and deficiencies and it is always helpful to avail expert advice to know what is possible to be achieved and what additional measures are needed by the group.

It is not enough to just provide empowerment. It is necessary to ensure that the empowerment is sustainable and sustained. Empowerment must, therefore, be a passion and well planned by governments and NGOs. Often efforts towards helping the marginalized get stagnant after initial enthusiasm by those involved in empowering. The transition from the helplessness of the poorly empowered to highly empowered must be well designed with goals along with well thought out ways required to sustain and improve once the goal is achieved. When the government or NGO starts handholding and training, resolving issues this is empowerment at the grass root level. The persons providing empowerment must be dedicated and sensitive and determined to strengthen the bottom of the socio-economic pyramid of India or wherever.

Empowerment, therefore, can be said to be steps taken to design and increase autonomy and self-determination in individuals and communities with an awareness of their rights and authorities and equip them with the necessary tools.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

It is a fact that we live in a world that has largely been patriarchal in nature and women have been consciously pushed to the background and denied opportunities of education or has any say in matters of the society or even self. As society progressed it became apparent that women have an equal measure of talent that can contribute to the growth of society in many ways. Today terms like gender empowerment are used which means empowerment of people of any gender, including biosexual and any other marginalized gender.

Mahatma Gandhi on Women

On a scale of one to ten, the Mahatma comes out with flying colors for his views on the various aspects concerning women in our society. Considering the fact that he wrote his ideas about 70 to 80 years ago, we can set aside some of his views such as the women being a complement of men in matters of occupation and education and female

chastity in the context of women's honor. The Mahatma, by far, can be considered the best friend of women in India and the world. The Mahatma's purity of thought and honest intentions are beyond question. No other man in the entire history of India or in the world had such godly ideas about women. For both men and women, to have a better perspective of each other and life, Gandhian literature will continue to be a prescription for many years to come.

Kiran Bedi

"Mobility will help women explore the world and expand their horizons of knowledge while financial dependence will embolden them to take decisions on their own. Girls should also learn self-defense to protect themselves", Ms. Bedi said. She urged the students to take up community service projects which would lead to social empowerment".

"The moment I empower a woman, I empower a family." Kiran shared when asked how she began down her path. "When I see women with time on her hands, I want to add value." Renowned for her innovative approach to law enforcement, Kiran is consistently honored as one of India's most admired women, including holding the title of MSN's 2011 Most Admired Female Icon

Women empowerment calls for gender equality with no difference in opportunities available to men. It means opportunities for women to be part of the government, to be an entrepreneur or whatever she chooses to be or do. The most important and urgent immediate steps to empower women are to create an environment where:

- There is no discrimination against women and girls.
- There is no violence against women and girls, domestic or public.
- Certain laws have also been put in place to empower women who are subject to the above atrocities.

In fact, because of the manner in which women have been neglected in the past, they should be provided with greater opportunities. It should be noted specifically that education does not automatically empower women. It is just one step towards empowerment. It provides women with knowledge, boldness to exert her knowledge, power, and authority to script her own success and become economically sound, successful and recognized and fulfilled in every way.

Women Empowerment is reflected through the Women's Security, Decision-making power, and Mobility.

Empowerment is a process through which a woman attains a state of power from a state of powerless, gains knowledge, awareness, and ownership of assets and holds a responsible and authority position in the public. The process of woman empowerment includes Women's security, Decision-Making power, and availability of funds, opportunities to grow, freedom of movement, freedom to choose, and freedom to own, freedom that is available to other privileged persons of society. It also means equality with men in matters of making choices about life and education, marriage, travel and equal opportunities in matters of employment, politics, and equal pay for equal work. The realization of women's needs has resulted in many women's organizations to help and empower women in particular. There have also been many movements for women's rights.

Empowerment thus aims at the elimination of obstacles in the path of Women's equality. Women empowerment makes a woman strong, confident, in control of her life and be able to claim her rights. Gender biasfree society must exist to encourage growth and improvement. A woman must be provided all opportunities to be an entrepreneur. Hindustan Levers has initiated initiative called project Shakti to empower women in rural India. Women entrepreneurship must be encouraged. Women must be encouraged to:

- Be a self-starter and take initiative.
- Be confident in achieving desired results.
- Possess determination to succeed and be able to create a niche place for her.
- Since there is no specific education or qualification in being an entrepreneur women entrepreneurship must be encouraged.
- Women have strong wings to fly very high. We are well aware of how far women entrepreneurs can reach. Successful businesswomen like Shanaz Hussain, Vandana Luthra, and Ekta Kapoor. This reminds me of a famous quote by Margaret Thatcher: "if you want something said ask a man if you want something done ask a woman"
- Indian women in the past have faced cultural bias and pressures of balancing home and family. Denying education to girls due to inherent discriminatory practices such as the practice of preference to son, only son is to be educated as he has to look after his family later. In spite of various types of drawbacks women have dared to dream and achieve and break the glass ceiling, overcoming challenges and becoming achievers. However, a matter like equal pay for equal work has a long way to go to bring gender equality.
- The first step to empowerment as Angelina Jolie says: "Figure out who you are separate from your family or the man or woman you are in a relationship with. Find out who you are in the world and what you need to feel good alone. I think that's the most important thing in life. Fine a sense of self because with that you can do anything else.
- It is well known that women empowerment in India is lagging behind compared to many western countries with gender equalities being at its worst historically with a social force like sati, child marriage, widows excluded from society and often almost at the brink of starvation. Even today India is highly male-dominated and a high percentage of women are forced to be at home and do household chores. Data from the NFHS-3 survey on women's decision-making power shows that only about one-third of the women interviewed took decisions on their own regarding household issues and their health. Although Decision-making power among employed urban women was higher than among rural and less educated women.

There have also been women to have been inherently empowered. Phoolan Devi, in spite of being illiterate, was determined to get even with all those who wronged her. She leashed her rage and took revenge and created a reputation for herself and came to be known as "Bandit Queen". She went on to gain further fame and fortune when a movie was made about her. That is why it is fair to say that it is hard to define empowerment and not all women need handholding.

We have begun to realize that women are half the wealth, half the power and half the strength of the country. Women inclusion is more beneficial than one can imagine.

A National Convention for “Integrated Child Development” was held in August 1986 followed by a major programme for empowerment of women called “Women in Development”. A major resolution proposed self-reliance for women and child development for the total population as a whole. State governments were urged to encourage career prospects for women, job satisfaction and child education, especially girl child.

As a world statesman Rajiv Gandhi’s concern for women empowerment extended to the third world. Women were encouraged to raise their voice for world peace and be the custodians of in times to come. At the NAM summit in Harare in the 1986 the young Indian Prime Minister was the most passionate crusader for women empowerment. He called for a full and meaningful participation of women in social, political, economic and cultural life.

India has some legal enactments for protection of women the most widely used one being “Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005” and Compulsory Registration of Marriage Act 2006.

There are also recent national capacity building programmes which include empowering women at grassroots, handhold, and training. It is hoped that in the coming years we can boast that we have achieved gender equality and that the entire Indian population is fully empowered.

Several laws are also in place to give the long-needed boost and empower women. The Equal Remuneration Act 1976 clearly deals with prevalent discrimination against women with regard to employment and remuneration.

Child marriage has been part of Indian Culture. The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2007 provides empowerment to both boys and girls so that they can fight the pressures of the society and remain free to pursue their own interest.

The Dowry Prohibition Act also goes a long way in women empowerment. Although the dowry system is still prevalent because of past customs and practices empowered women are aware of their rights and fighting it. Men too are empowered and aware of this social wrong and are trying to change that.

All of these laws and other laws have gone a long way in understanding the value of a woman rather than considering her a burden.

The government of India also has a national policy for women empowerment. The National Commission for Women was set up in 1990 to look into women issues.

However, in 2016 the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India has framed a draft National Policy for Women Empowerment to bring about social change and change the prevalent mindset about women in India. The policy would enable women to participate in all matters as equal partners. Particular reference is made to women’s reproductive rights and to food and nutrition of pregnant and lactating mothers, women education and visibility, decision making and tackling violence against women. The policy deal with changes is gender roles although the policy is at a draft stage we hope it will come into force soon.

CONCLUSIONS

Empowerment is the need of the day in the lower strata of the Indian population. A large number of them are still highly exploited in many ways but it is the women who are bearing the brunt of financial and other forms of support. Recent news in many parts of India and bringing us live information on how even NGOs are exploiting women. There is a lack of safety even in places where they go to find some support when they face hardships and sexual exploitation.

It is hoped that such awareness will help to formulate and more watertight empowerment policy for women and men and lead us to a healthy and strong country.

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